

# Science Fantasy

No. 9

VOLUME 3

1/6



## *In the next issue*

*Five people entered the Matter Transmitter on Mars for transference to Earth. Nothing had ever gone wrong before—it shouldn't this time. But only four people arrived. The fifth one was—where?*

### **FIVE INTO FOUR**

**By J. T. McIntosh**

Illustrated by QUINN

"I wonder," ruminated Mary Gorton, "if I could persuade either of you two millionaires to buy IT and run it like a public service and not a cattle market."

Frank and Herbert smiled very faintly. "Interplanetary Transference is a World Senate monopoly, Miss Gorton," he said dryly. "I doubt if either Mr. Bissinger or myself, or both together for that matter, could buy up the world government."

**an intriguing novelette**

**AND**

★ **CHANDLER**  
★ **TUBB**  
★ **JORDAN**  
★ **COLE**  
★ **RAYER**

# Science Fantasy

Vol. 3, No. 9

1954

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## GUEST EDITORIAL

*Less than three years ago the name of J. T. McIntosh was just beginning to be known in fantasy circles. At that time Mr. McIntosh was a journalist on a Scottish newspaper. He decided to try full-time writing and within two years his name has become synonymous with outstanding novels and short stories.*

# Something New Wanted . . .

By J. T. McINTOSH

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You and I have read many a plea by magazine editors and others for new ideas in science fiction, and many a condemnation of space opera. Nobody, it seems, loves space opera. Everyone, it seems, is waiting, gasping for someone to try something which hasn't been done before—in idea, plot, style, treatment, anything.

The fiction editor of *Colliers* says: "We're not interested in standard space opera or propaganda stories disguised as science fiction. Instead *Colliers* is searching for active, dramatic, even ironical stories based on interesting or unusual scientific concepts which permit the intelligent reader to exercise his mind and imagination, even as he is entertained."

And most other editors have begged for new concepts in terms which practically guarantee blank cheques for anyone who can come up with anything new.

Authors supply, by and large, what editors and readers want. Why is it, then, that so much of present-day science fiction is on the same old themes? Take *New Worlds* 23, just for example. The plots of the stories are: Alien life-form horror loose on spaceship; prize in world-wide lottery is exile for life; derelict spaceship is link with older, wiser race; how to get the stolen plans across the frontier?

Is it, then, so very difficult to find a new idea or write a new kind of story? Are today's magazines using well-worn plots like the four above because nobody can think of anything new to write about?

I don't blame the four authors for using these elderly plots—I can't afford to, because when I read the issue I'd just finished my own story on the prize-in-world-wide-lottery-is-exile-for-life theme.

My experience of science fiction is that *you*, readers and editors of science fiction and fantasy magazines, are not really very keen on anything new, no matter what you say. You don't like anything the first time you see it: maybe the second, and certainly the third, fourth and fifth time, if it's well done.

Consider the prize-winning *Takeoff*, and the prize-winning *Earth Abides*, and the prize-winning *One in Three Hundred* (said he modestly), is there anything new about any of these? Isn't *Takeoff* just an old story retold well, and *Earth Abides* an even older story, but told as if it were really happening today?

Once I had a really good idea, a new approach. I'm not going to tell you what it was, because even yet I hope to use it some day. I discussed this theme with editors. One was enthusiastic . . . but of course, I'd take the story on and explain so-and-so, wouldn't I, compressing the material I had mentioned into a brief introduction? That would make a real story.

Maybe it would have done. I don't deny it. It would also have made the story like a hundred others.

This isn't an isolated case. As an author, I frequently discuss themes with editors, so that I won't waste time writing stories that nobody wants.

And I find (here's where I make a dozen potent transatlantic enemies), that the themes and ideas which are met with an enthusiastic response are the good oldies, or even the bad oldies, so long as the path is clear and well-trodden I suppose the idea is that if a path is obviously used a lot, it must lead somewhere.

It has been recommended that good music should never be heard for the first time. It seems to be the same with new ideas in science fiction—they should never be encountered for the first time; which means, in most cases, that authors should work round anything out of the ordinary very slowly and gradually. Asimov did this in the *Foundation* series.

Ask who invented jazz, and as likely as not you'll be told Irving Berlin did. Like omnivorous animals, the bigger and stronger innovation assimilate all the others, swallow each other up. If a little man invents something and makes twenty per cent. use of it, and a big man steals the idea and makes a hundred per cent. use of it, who will get the credit for the idea?

If Marilyn Monroe is built up just a little more, she'll get the credit for inventing sex.

That's how the new ideas do get into science fiction, for the most part—someone puts them in a story which does not get very far, but which is at least published somewhere. It comes in last or second—last in the magazine's reader rating, if any. (The author, if he's a sensible sort of chap, realises his mistake and writes, the next time, about the little robot Santa Claus forgot, of the Third Intergalactic War, or the man who went back in time and killed his great-great-great-grandfather by mistake.)

Someone else sees the story and decides that it's a good idea gone wrong, and there's no reason why it shouldn't be used again, the right way this time. He brings the idea more in line with what science fiction readers are used to. And this story sells for more money to a bigger magazine.

Another author reads it and thinks how much better it would have been if . . . but there's no reason why he shouldn't write it that way himself. He does a neater, more polished job, and this time the idea is wholly acceptable, and the story is reprinted in two anthologies.

It isn't always quite like this, and I'm not suggesting authors deliberately steal ideas in quite that way. But simplify what actually happens, take it down to its simplest terms, and that's what you get.

Often an author steals ideas from himself, like Asimov, Simak, Bradbury and a few others I've actually noticed at it.

So generally innovations of any kind get into science fiction in small doses. The effect from month to month is barely noticeable, but from year to year it's quite considerable.

Before the war characterization in science fiction barely existed. If you knew the characters apart, that was good enough. It was a hard job to get a sociological story into a science fiction magazine, unless the sociology was well diluted by gadgetry. There was no psychological science fiction. Women were just the Love Interest—the girls in science fiction weren't typed, they were just feminine names. Aliens were invariably either sinister or funny. All that was needed as a theme for a story was an encounter with a mad professor who happened to have a beautiful daughter, some bizarre idea of what living in hyperspace would be like, the fact that ice is lighter than water, the first flight to the moon or to Mars, an accidental journey in time caused by an electric shock.

It is interesting to picture the effect of a Van Vogt novelette on the readers of *Wonder Stories* in the early 'thirties. Would they

have marvelled, like some watcher of the skies, as some new planet swam into their ken?

They wouldn't have had the chance. The science fiction editors of the early 'thirties would have sent "Asylum Earth" back to the author with few regrets. The world of science fiction wasn't ready for it yet.

Practically all our present science fiction would have been rejected, then, with one of these comments: involved, incomprehensible, implausible, not science fiction, not our style . . .

What the editors concerned would really have liked to say about it was fantastic.

In just the same way we aren't ready for the science fiction of 1964. It would be involved, incomprehensible, implausible, not science fiction. Or it wouldn't be involved enough.

Certainly it would be different, certainly *fantastic*.

If we don't really want new ideas in science fiction, why do we keep asking for them?

Well, new ideas are excellent in theory. Everyone wants new ideas, even old-established firms which will refuse to consider them when they get them. Everyone, in fact, wants new ideas until he gets them. This goes particularly for magazine editors.

A story comes in which has a new idea. The editor doesn't want to publish it, naturally. But he's been screaming for new ideas—what excuse has he for refusing to publish this story?

Easy. It isn't good. The idea isn't really new. The style isn't right. Involved, incomprehensible, implausible, not science fiction . . . Most of all, the first thing, the last thing, the thing you can't argue about: It isn't good.

So there we are. Science fiction is exposed at last. Without fear or favour, I've given you *The Truth about Science Fiction: Editors, and through them, you, don't really want new concepts—you merely want the old ones done better.*

You *have* grown out of mad professors with beautiful daughters, but you haven't grown up. Science fiction is still juvenile because you want it that way.

Science fiction won't be intelligent, mature and daring in its presentation of new concepts until there are enough people who want it that way to make it worth while writing and publishing that kind of science fiction.

You get what you deserve—but more than that, you get what you *want*.

That's why there are so few new ideas in science fiction.

—J. T. McIntosh





*All the earthmen required was sufficient water for spaceship fuel to get them back to Earth—and water was the one precious commodity the Martians couldn't spare at any price.*

# THIS PRECIOUS STONE

By H. J. MURDOCH

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Illustrated by QUINN

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## I.

Two planes, one red, one green, twisted and reared above the red desert of Mars. They never soared high. Mars would support life, human life, on the surface, but humans needed the whole light pressure of air that the small world could muster.

The planes were out of place on Mars. Clumsy, ugly, their very lines showed that they were inartistic adaptations of the machines of another world. A highly intelligent observer, merely looking at them, might have postulated a race which had come from a bigger, denser world with a complete technology, and had not time or talent to adapt it properly to the new conditions.

But theory and history meant nothing to the two pilots. It did occur to Frank Conn, in the green plane, that it was ironic that he should belong to a race which had beaten space and yet be dependent on hot, oily machine-guns which might jam at any minute. But that thought was soon gone in the desperate effort to stay alive.

Neither was trying to harm the other's machine, for planes were valuable and should be captured where possible. A dying pilot is liable to land safely if he can. Once down, illogically, he may try to fire his machine. But then it may be too late.

So in the mortal battle Earthman and Martian were shooting at each other, not at the machines. If planes were valuable, experienced pilots were priceless. A complete victory was the capture of a plane, with the pilot dead. That gave the enemy one pilot less, and

the victor two planes more. For a captured plane made a difference of two—one less to the enemy, one more to the victor's side.

But Frank wasn't going to win such a victory. He had been confident ten, even five minutes before. Now blood poured into his eyes from a gash in his forehead. There was no feeling in either of his legs, and there were two or three bullets in his shoulders. He suspected there was a bullet in his stomach too, but curiously enough there was no pain—no specialised pain. Feeling seemed to have gone, and in its place was a strange sensation of lightness, as if his head was still alive but his body was dead. He felt the pain in his head—nothing else.

Then suddenly Frank had the opening he had long since ceased to expect. The red plane lurched as its engine faltered momentarily, and before it was under full control again Frank, a wreck of a man but still a great pilot, had fired a long, deadly burst into the cockpit.

There was no marked effect, although Frank was certain he had put at least a score of bullets into his antagonist's body. But now the Martian was making no effort to finish him off. The planes were circling nervously, each pilot watching for attack and fearing to make it, in case the other should prove more in control of his machine in the last emergency.

Then, abruptly, Frank had shot off northwards. He had made the turn before he realised what he was going to do. He was betraying his race by leaving the fight unfinished, when it was still remotely possible that he might, in a sense, win it. It hardly seemed to matter if he betrayed his friends further by seeking out the Martian Healers.

The Healers, he knew, were the only people who might be able to restore him to life. Even without pain, he knew the extent of his injuries. Short of the Healers, there was nothing in store for him but death. He had never seen a Healer, but he had heard that men who came to them more seriously injured than he was, with only a spark of life remaining, had walked out of their caves whole and healthy.

After a while he saw the Martian had fallen in with him, wing to wing. Just as easily he might have finished the job, but he didn't know that. He had given Frank credit, the Earthman realised, for remaining wary and seeing what was happening about him.

So they were both on their way to the Healers, both betraying their races. Frank tried to laugh ironically, but his mouth filled with blood.

Then at last, as he knew he would make it, he saw something about the Martian that he had not seen during the fight. Now the goggles were up and—the Martian was a woman. There was no good reason why Frank should know that, for he could only see part of her face, no more, but he knew.

He had been content to land with the Martian and join him in seeking life from the Healers—but that was when he thought the Martian was a man. To be beaten on level terms by a woman would always sting—so Frank flung his machine round for one last treacherous burst.

It was suicidal. Flying on steadily he hadn't realised how he was gradually losing all ability to control the plane.

His plane reared wildly, like a galloping horse suddenly startled. The Martian could have been in no better state. The two planes, in perfect control an hour ago in the hands of the same pilots, staggered into each other as if two frightened novices were at the controls. They crashed and fell apart.

The thing moving slowly and painfully across the red sands should have been motionless for ever. It had once been a man, a man who had called himself Frank Conn. On Mars he had added the designation 'Earthman,' if only to show which side he was on. But now it no longer mattered.

It was more than half an hour since the planes had crashed. Frank had taken an interminable time to free himself of the wreckage. Probably the crash had seriously injured what was left of him.

He knew nothing about that, except that he now had a stump and a tourniquet instead of a left leg. Gangrene would set in, but what was the difference? He only had another hour or so to live anyhow.

All feeling about the other plane and the Martian woman in it had gone. If the second wreck had been a yard out of his way in a direct line to the cave mouth which he could see about a mile away across the desert, he would have passed it without a glance. But it was directly in his path, so the fight wasn't yet over.

At last he reached the Martian plane. His method of locomotion is best not described. He dragged himself to the cabin and looked inside.

He still had his right arm, and there was still a gun at his belt. The woman was alive, though unconscious. One shot, and at least he would have broken even—perhaps better.

But in his half-crazed mind he decided to play God. Perhaps the fact that she was young, not more than eighteen Earth years, and pretty, as far as he could tell, influenced him. Perhaps it was that by killing her he would only be squaring his personal battle, while by saving her he would have done better, placing himself above her.

At any rate, he caught her overalls firmly and slowly dragged her clear. If the plane had been upright it would have been impossible. But it had landed on a wing, and he didn't have to lift her, only drag her.

When she was clear of the plane he surveyed her carefully. There was not a scratch on her face, and no sign of injury. Frank clutched his gun in sudden fear that she should wake and be uninjured. He knew the fantastic misses which could occur in an air battle, how a flier could be certain he had killed his enemy and find him unscratched in the wreckage of his plane. And even a Martian, and a girl at that, could handle him now with one hand, one finger.

Carefully he felt her overalls for blood. He drew his hand away in horror. She was still beautiful, what he could see of her. He was fervently glad that he could see no more of her.

He didn't have to make a decision. She opened her eyes, and instantly pain clouded them. She was not interested in him as friend or enemy. He knew that as she scratched at her belt for a gun that wasn't there. She only wanted to die.

Frank searched his mind for all the Martian he knew. He would need it among the Healers.

"Come on," he said. "The Healers' caves are just a little further on."

That gave her something to live for again. She looked at him and knew she owed him her life—that whatever he had done to her, a moment before he could have killed her and instead talked of the Healers' caves.

They had no strength for talk. After their different fashions, each driven purely by the desire to live, they started for the nearest cave. At first they dragged themselves independently. Then in some strange fashion they discovered that if they used Frank's one leg and the girl's good knee, and clung in a hideous embrace, they could progress better.

It took them well over an hour to reach the cave, and as they reached the heavy shadows of the cliffs Frank knew that his spark of life was all but out. He could see the bell that was used to summon the Healers, but he could never reach it. He tried to move

his leg, but nothing happened. The bell might be a million miles away for all the good it would do him.

The Martian girl was no more alive than he was. Her overalls had begun to sag horribly. But the difference was—she could still move. She freed herself from Frank, balanced herself on one knee and one hand, and looked down at Frank.

"This is quits, Earthman," she said, and edged painfully towards the bell.

## II.

There came a time when Frank was almost alive again. He seemed to have no body, but when he remembered his last experience of a body he wasn't sorry.

A voice asked him a question on which his fate probably rested. But he played dead, thinking cunningly: "If I'm dead, I can't talk, can I?"

The question was repeated: "If you live, will you work for us?"

It was a simple question, containing only easy words. "If you live : . ." But he *must* live. Had he and the Martian girl gone through hell for nothing?

The same question sounded again, patiently. It appeared that an answer was expected. He had already forgotten the question. But the answer to most questions was "Yes." People didn't ask you, in such circumstances, if you wanted to die.

"Yes," he said.

He was amazed at the sound, for it was familiar. He had heard it before. The voice that spoke was his own. But to speak he had to have lungs, larynx, a mouth. And to hear, he suddenly realised, he had to have ears, eardrums, a brain . . .

But then he didn't have them any more. He was dead again. It was getting familiar.

There was another time when he was even more alive. This time he could think. He could follow the sense, even in Martian, as a voice said: "You have a saying in your world that you don't get anything for nothing. It's true now. You can live again, move, laugh and talk, but before we do anything for you we have to have your promise that you'll work for us, for our purposes, against even your own race. Don't give it yet."

There was a pause. Then the voice went on. "Now, you are free. You can make your choice. If you would rather die than work against your friends, your race, your world, say so and you will certainly die. But take warning—if you promise to work for us, we shall not simply believe you and restore you. Once you have

promised, we shall make you keep that promise. We can do that. Do you understand?"

Frank understood. He said so. Again he could hear his voice, though he could see or feel nothing.

"I have no choice," he said.

"You are wrong," said the voice. "Others of your race have sought us when they were on the point of death. Many preferred death, even then, to being traitors. Do you still agree?"

The voice talked blithely of 'your race,' thought Frank bitterly. But what had his race ever done for him? Made him fight on and on, until sooner or later he must meet his match, as he had in the Martian girl, and die.

"I do," he said, and meant it.

There was only one more occasion—then—when he talked with a Healer. This time he could hear and he could feel. But he was still blind, and he could smell and taste nothing. He knew that beyond all doubt in the total absence of these senses. Often a man might think he smelt or tasted nothing, but such occasions were jungles of sensation beside what Frank was experiencing.

"This is the last time I shall speak," the voice told him. "I shall tell you what you must do, and if you refuse—but you know about that. If you agree, then you do it. There is no further opportunity to draw back.

"You and the Martian girl who came with you—her name is Meris—will return to your people, secure the propulsion unit of the Earth spaceship, and bring it to us. Then your responsibility ends and you are free. That is all that we ask of you. Do you still agree?"

"Of course. I have said so already."

He had expected far worse. There was only one spaceship on Mars, and if he succeeded in stealing its propulsion unit that would be the end of all space travel for the time being. But what did it matter? Perhaps that ship would never fly again anyway. What good was a spaceship without fuel?

"There are no further instructions," said the voice. "How you accomplish your task is your affair. I shall only suggest one thing. You had better work with Meris, and it would be advisable for you to learn each other's language so that you can pass as a Martian and she as an Earthwoman. You will have time during your convalescence.

"You will hear or see no more of me until you return with the

propulsion unit. Whether you will succeed or not is out of my hands. I can only tell you that you will succeed or die."

Frank wanted to ask something, but apparently he could only speak when permitted, and he was not permitted to ask more than the Healer was prepared to tell. No sound came.

He was wondering why he had first been asked if he would work for the Healers against his own race, and then told his job was to bring back what was possibly the one propulsion unit left in existence. Surely it should have been the other way round? Why ask him the big thing first, and then, when he believed he had to be a traitor to live, explain that all that was wanted was the propulsion unit?

But he fell into an induced sleep before he was able to answer his own question.

### III.

Frank sat up. He was whole, incredibly whole. He was weak and some parts of him didn't seem as good as others. But he could raise his left arm, use it as an arm, and there was no pain in it. His leg wasn't a stump, it was a perfectly good leg. It didn't encourage him to stand on it too long, but he could walk.

He was naked, and as he passed his hand over his belly he couldn't find where the wound had been. He might be weak, but he wasn't ill. He had never felt better.

It was what he had expected, what had driven him north when he knew he couldn't win the air battle, what had made him drag himself across the interminable stretch of sand when his body screamed at him to leave it alone and let it die. But it filled him, none the less, with awe and wonder.

He was in a pleasant, light-walled room which contained his couch, a writing-desk, two chairs, a clothes closet, two doors, a cupboard—and windows. Curiously, he moved to look outside.

He saw a beautiful garden, but a dead garden, he knew instinctively. It was too perfect, too still, too like a painted canvas. There was no way of opening the windows, but without further evidence he was satisfied that the whole scene, and the sunlight that flooded the room, was a projection. He was probably deep in the cliffs, perhaps below the level of the desert. The Healers who could repair a body as damaged as his had been must have other secrets.

The next thing was clearly the doors. No, first he would dress. From what the Healer had told him he gathered that the Martian girl, Meris, would be around somewhere.

The variety of clothes in the closet staggered him. Every current

Earth or Mars fashion was there. Moved by some ironic whim he chose a Martian *nolor*, which was not unlike a Roman toga, and draped it about him. Automatically he felt his chin. It was smooth. There was no mirror, but as far as he could tell he was ready to meet Meris.

He had one last look about his room, finding that the cupboard was full of synthetic food. The Martians would never have a food problem. They might be behind Terran science in many branches, particularly the technology of destruction, but they were wonderful chemists in a limited way. There was no natural food which the Martians couldn't synthesize better.

One of the doors led to a washroom. There was running water—which on Mars, was a wonder to top everything else. It made Frank thoughtful. Were they really to be permitted to leave this place with the knowledge of its water reserve?

He opened the other door, and found Meris in a room identical with his, except that there was an extra door. She must have wakened at the same time as he had, and had had the same whim. For instead of Martian clothes she wore an Earth-style blouse and skirt.

They looked at each other and laughed. Then they stopped laughing as they remembered they were enemies. Then they smiled nervously as they realised they were now allies, forced to work together.

Sometimes the first impression made by a person is engraved so deeply that it is difficult to imagine him, or her, doing anything else, wearing other clothes, acting another part. Frank knew it was so with Meris. The girl who faced him, he told himself, could never pilot a plane, had never worn torn, dirty overalls, could not have crawled mortally wounded across the sands and made a last effort when he was finished. His mind knew it was the same girl, but refused to believe it. This was a stranger he was meeting for the first time. She was soft and fragile and yielding, where the other had been tough and inflexible.

He sought the Martian words—always an effort. "We have to reach an understanding," he said. "I think that comes first, don't you?"

"No, let's explore first," she said. "Then we can talk. We have to talk, I suppose."

She was less ready to conciliate than he was. That, perhaps, was natural. The Earthmen were the aggressors.



The second door led into a larger room that was half window. It was warm, and the sun shone brightly into it. The windows which formed two of the walls showed another view of the same perfect garden which Frank had already examined.

"It isn't real," he remarked, as Meris stared outside in wonder. She had never seen a garden. The Martians had no water to waste on plants.

She whirled on him. "Nonsense. I can see it plainly."

"Everything you see isn't real. Behind the window is solid rock, I imagine. What you see is a picture."

"But I can see the flowers move!"

"A moving picture then. Three-dimensioned. Break the window, and you'll destroy the picture."

She didn't seem convinced. He didn't insist. He might be wrong. To the Healers all things seemed possible—except procuring the unit themselves.

Off the sunroom two other doors led. One was to a whole toilet suite. Frank had heard of most of the things he saw there, but to Meris they were starkly incredible. She stood inside the doorway, almost afraid to go further.

"A water reservoir," she breathed.

Frank laughed. "No," he said. "A bath."

"You mean—in which to wash?"

"No, you . . ." But there was no word for 'swim' in the Martian vocabulary. "Like this," he said.

He hadn't swum since he was a child on Earth, nearly twenty years ago. But he knew no one ever forgets how to swim. He dived into the pool and struck out for the other side—clumsily, but effectively. He turned, trod water and looked at Meris. She was staring at him, in wonder and horror. Horror that he should desecrate water by immersing himself in it.

He swam back and climbed out, his *nolor* clinging to him, his skin glistening. "It's purified and aerated," he said. "Look—." He showed her where the water was drawn out through a grill and returned by another.

"Then—there's more water?" she asked.

"There must be." He led her into one of the small rooms of the pool hall. It contained showers, mirrors, a washstand. He turned a faucet and let the water run. She touched it in disbelief.

"But there must be enough water in these hills for the whole world!" she exclaimed.

"Not necessarily. When you let it run here, I expect it's purified

and returned. The atmosphere plant will condense water vapour from the air. I don't suppose there's ever a drop lost. So you can wash and bathe and drink as much as you like, and know you're wasting nothing."

In other rooms there were steam baths, more showers, and foot-sprays. Meris would have tried a shower, reassured by Frank's words, but he pointed out to her that the clothes she was wearing were meant to be kept dry.

Further exploration revealed nothing but a door from the sun-room which led to a bare passage. The passage ran straight for about a hundred yards and then the way was barred by a door which they couldn't open.

"Then we're prisoners," said Meris, calmer at the thought than she had been in considering the wonders of the toilet suite.

"For the moment only, I expect," Frank replied. "We're not strong yet—I don't know about you, but I'm tired already. I suppose by the time we're stronger this door will open and we'll be free."

They returned to the sunroom.

"You're supposed to be able to pass as an Earth woman as well as a Martian," said Frank. "Were you told that?"

The girl nodded. "If it's ever necessary I'll have to darken my skin," she said. "You Terrans are brown beside us."

"That's what I was thinking about. While we talk, you can sunbathe."

"Sunbathe?" Frank had to manufacture the word in Martian, so it was no wonder she failed to understand it.

"When we first came here we found the skin cracked unless we dried it with sunrays, real or artificial. It doesn't bother you because you're acclimatised, and you avoid what sun there is on Mars and keep your skin pale. That's unfortunate for us now, for if we're dark enough to be Terrans we're bound to be almost too dark to be Martians. The rays here seem strong enough. We'll just have to tan until we might be either Martian or Terran, and then stop."

Meris nodded. "It's possible. You're not much darker than I am."

"No, but I've lost most of my tan during the Healing."

He went to her room, the girl following him, and looked in her closet. As he expected, he found swimsuits. But the Martians, born and raised on a colder world, were naturally modest. He chose a rather conservative playsuit for Meris. He was not surprised when she flushed and refused to wear it.

"Among us, it's moderate," he told her. "You might as well get used to it."

He went through to his own room. He needed the sun as much as Meris. He had no idea about how long the Healing had taken. But his skin was dead white, as after any long illness. If his own friends saw him they would be liable to shoot him first as a Martian, and only then recognise him as an Earthman.

He tapped on the communicating door when he was ready. There was a strangled cry of protest from Meris, so he waited. But when she had had plenty of time to dress, he opened the door and went through.

#### IV.

In some wars, Frank reflected, it would have been impossible for Meris and he, enemies, to accept so easily the idea of working together. But the war of Martians and Earthmen wasn't as bitter as some wars, even if it was quite as determined.

Both sides knew exactly what the fight was about—that helped. It was a war for water—the Martians fought to keep what they had and win back what the Earthmen had taken from them, and the Earthmen to wrest more from the Martians and retain their own. To the Martians it was a natural struggle, the cause of most of the wars they had known.

Frank, wearing only a pair of trunks and lying comfortably on a mat in the sunroom, and Meris, trying to relax on another mat but uneasily conscious of every glance he cast at her, were about to fight the whole war over again to reach some kind of understanding.

"You haven't realised the fundamental truth of wearing sports clothes," said Frank lazily, "which is that if you feel naked, you look it. Not otherwise."

Her shorts and bodice wouldn't have been out of place on a grandmother, but she might have been a schoolgirl wearing her first two-piece swimsuit from her discomfort and her hot cheeks. Frank was amused. Was this the fighter who had proved his match in the air?

"Well, we'll forget that," said Frank. "First, you must believe what we've been trying to tell you for nearly twenty years. If you gave us the water we need—and admittedly, we'd need about all you've got—we'd use it to return to Earth, and could easily bring back far more than we took from you."

Meris forgot her discomfort. "And suppose you forgot us—or failed to reach Earth—or failed to return?" she demanded bitterly.

"Or suppose you couldn't find enough water on Earth? Or . . ."

"It's difficult for you to understand, I know," said Frank. "But Earth is two-thirds sea—maybe more. Sea—that's water anything up to seven miles deep. I'm not telling you something I've been told myself. I've seen it. When I was a child I was taken from Australia, one of our continents, to America—and I spent weeks and weeks on the ship, seeing nothing but water. Earth could give Mars rivers and oceans, and the level of Earth's seas wouldn't sink a measurable distance."

"Earthmen have admitted in the past," said the girl, "that this water would be of no use to us. It's full of salt."

Frank nodded. "But your own purifying units could handle that. Besides, although most of Earth's water is salt, so much of it is fresh that we could still give you rivers and lakes without sending you a drop of salt water."

"But you say you need all we have. And it's always possible that your ship will be unable to return. If your ships run on water, and Earth has so much, why has there been no ship from Earth since before I was born?"

That was the unanswerable question. None of the Earthmen knew.

There had been interplanetary travel for a period of five years. Many Earthmen came to Mars then, a few Martians went to Earth. There was no cause for conflict, for the Martian's only treasure was their few thousand gallons of water. Trading had begun, Terrans married Martians and had normal children, and it appeared that there was no risk of war, ever, between the two races who turned out to be one.

But then a great ship had come from Earth bearing colonists, but no water. There was nothing wrong or unusual in that. There was plenty of room on Mars.

The only difficulty was that the huge ship, on which Frank had arrived as a child, could not return. That fact only emerged when no other ship came from Earth. No ship brought the water which was the fuel for the spaceships of Earth.

The Earth colony had waited, at first patient and then anxious, as no word came from their own world. They tried to reach Earth by radio, but their failure meant nothing. It had never been possible to penetrate the heaviside layer from Mars.

Still no ship came. When the catastrophe, whatever it was, came, it might have happened that there were five or six spaceships on

Mars, all fully fueled. It chanced that there was only one ship, the biggest ever built, and no fuel. It needed thousands of tons of water before it could move. The colonists among them had a few hundred gallons.

Anxiety led to a certain sharpness in the first appeal to the Martians. There had not been time for many Martians to visit Earth and return bearing tales of Earth's abundance of water. The Martians frankly disbelieved the Earthmen's promise to bring back ten times, a hundred times, what they used in their ship.

It was difficult for the Earthmen to realise, then, what they were asking. It was like the Martians or some other race coming to Earth and asking the loan of all Earth's gold, silver, jewels, platinum and radium. But it was more even than that, for Earth could live without gold and silver and jewels, but all of Mars would die without water.

The intentions of both sides were honest at the start. The Earthmen meant to return to Mars at once, whatever the position on Earth, and replenish the Martian reservoirs from the spaceship's vast holds. The Martians were prepared to share their water with the Earthmen on Mars. There was more than enough for everyone if it was used carefully as water, not spaceship fuel.

But the Earthmen wanted more. They needed almost all the Martians had. So they started out, still with the best intentions, to take what they wanted and return it when they could.

The Martians, a peaceable race, would probably never have fought over anything else. But for centuries they had guarded their water carefully, not against Earthmen, but against waste. Now there was a new enemy, and they fought.

They revealed an unexpected talent for imitation. The Earthmen used a weapon against them. For a few weeks, no more, there was no answer, Martians died, and the Earthmen won a little more water. The Martians would never destroy it, even when they were beaten.

Then the Martians would have the weapon, whether they had duplicated a captured weapon or inferred its principles from its use.

The Earthmen began to realise they had a fight on their hands, and—a grimmer realisation—that they hadn't the men they needed. Fighters, yes, builders, workers, technicians. But no top-ranking scientists and chemists. They could make ordinary planes, cars, tanks, guns. But no one knew how to make the heavier weapons which they knew Earth had had. The T-ray which killed electrical resistance, drained batteries, fused power-stations, stopped ignition

systems from functioning—no one had the secret. The atom-bomb—they all knew of it, but no one could make one. Even some of the commonplaces of Earth wars were unavailable to that group, which was composed of colonists and traders, not war scientists.

Indeed, soon the inexperienced Martians began to produce developments beyond those particular Earthmen. Earth, which had taught Mars in destruction, now sometimes had to learn. The balance was kept by the Earthmen's greater experience in war, and by occasional useful memories someone had of something which could be duplicated on Mars.

So the battle had gone on for nearly twenty Earth years, and Frank and Meris recalled most of it in heated discussion.

"It's so *silly*," exclaimed Frank. "All Mars' water problems for ever could be solved if only we had enough to make a single one-way trip to Earth."

But then Meris introduced the first new factor in the argument. "And our job is to prevent that," she said. "We are to steal the ship's propulsion unit. I take it if we succeed, that will end the war for water?"

Frank stared at her abruptly. He hadn't got that far. It was difficult to remember that this girl, however much she might be devalued by circumstances, was at least his potential equal mentally.

"True," he said. "We can't duplicate the unit—not the men and women who are here on Mars. So when it's gone the war will end."

"And isn't that desirable?"

"Yes—but we must live here and never know why no more ships came from Earth."

"Perhaps it is better not to know. Frank, we can no longer be enemies. The very job we have promised to do entails co-operation between us—if we succeed, the war will end. Try to see the Martian attitude. If we gave you the water, we might get it back and we might not. We need no more—but we need all we have. We can't risk our existence for something we don't need, and we don't need extra water. You see?"

Frank sighed. "I see. And the Healers, whoever and wherever they are, have gone to the root of the matter. They want the war to end, so they send us for the one propulsion unit in existence. When they get it, if we succeed, they'll probably destroy it. It seems a pity."

"But Martians and Earthmen will be able to live in peace again, on Mars," said Meris quietly. "And we have a lot to learn from each other—besides war."

## V.

There were to be three weeks of inaction, and then enough action to last them the rest of their lives. They guessed the second part, but had no idea about how long the respite would last. Even after they felt themselves fit and strong, the door to the outside remained closed.

Two people who had been enemies, living in a confined space, couldn't slip easily into trust and collaboration without incidents . . .

"How can I ever trust a man who agreed to work against his own race?" Meris demanded.

"I might ask the same thing," replied Frank evenly.

"I agreed to work for the Healers. They're Martian. They're our gods, insofar as we've had any gods in the last twenty thousand years. There's no superstition about it—but I knew it was safe to promise. You promised to work for Martians against Earthmen. The least that can be said against you is that you're a traitor."

"Perhaps I trusted the Healers—rather than anyone."

"Trusted people you never saw?"

"Yes. I don't know why, but I do trust the Healers. I believe that what they want is right. Don't you?"

Meris frowned. "Well . . . yes," she said.

"Did you always? Aren't you told, too, that to go to the Healers is treason?"

"Yes, we . . ." She started, and looked keenly at Frank, troubled.

"You mean they . . . took possession of us in some way?"

"Remember we were told we couldn't go back on our word, once we promised? Perhaps even before we promised, new patterns had been placed in our minds."

She stared at him in horror. But it passed. Perhaps it was meant to pass. They didn't speak of it again.

One of the many quarrels developed while they were sunning themselves and apparently on the best of terms. Suddenly Meris was taunting him:

"I've heard a lot about the physical strength of Earthmen, but I never saw it. I suppose it's a convenient lie for you, but . . ."

"It's no lie," retorted Frank. "We grew up on a bigger planet. Naturally we're three or four times stronger than you. The Jovians, if there were any, would be as much stronger than us."

His tone was quiet and reasonable. But Meris was spoiling for a fight. "I suppose you could tear me to pieces with one hand?" she mocked him.

"Sure, but what would that prove? Now if I were a girl, and you a man, and I took you apart with one arm . . ."

Meris kicked him in the ribs. Her foot was bare, but so were Frank's ribs, and he was hurt.

Conveniently, she was wearing slacks and a very tough shirt. He took her gently by the waistband and the collar and shook her above his head like a rag doll. Then he put her down carefully.

"Satisfied?" he asked.

Satisfied wasn't really the word. Convinced, yes. Meris looked for no more fights.

"But why should I learn to swim?" Meris asked. "I'll never have the chance again."

"You never know when you're going to have the chance—even on Mars. Besides, it may do you good now. Swimming's sometimes used in therapy on Earth. It has cured paralysis sometimes when all else failed."

"But I'd have to wear one of those—things."

She was still as modest as ever. He had succeeded in getting her used to shorts, but wearing a bathing-dress was beyond her.

"I can't understand you," he said. "Now if I'd made you fight for your honour from the first night and . . ."

"Oh, but that's different," she exclaimed.

He raised his eyebrows.

"I'm quite ready to sleep with you if you like. I thought you weren't interested. But nakedness—that's another matter."

There had only been one other girl in Frank's life before then. Her name was Betty Kemp, and she was a flier too. But from that time, to keep things tidy in his own mind, he considered Meris as his wife. It was sound enough according to Martian custom.

But though she was his wife and though she did learn to swim, Meris did it decently dressed—by her standards. That was still another matter.

"Why have you Earthmen never built a smaller spaceship?" Meris asked. "You make planes and guns and cars. Why not a smaller ship that could reach Earth using the water you have?"

"Because," said Frank slowly, "we can't. There's no secrets now, Meris, so here's one—there isn't a scientist among us. Only a few technicians who remember a little of what scientists told them. There's not one of us who understands the propulsion unit, the thing the Healers want. That's probably why they want it—we can never make another."

"But you can fly the spaceship?"



"As you might fly a plane, and be unable to repair your engine if it went back on you."

Meris looked chastened. "And you held us off without scientists," she murmured. "We thought . . ."

"That you were fighting all that Earth could produce? No, Meris. One ship of war from Earth, or one really good physicist to join us and help us, and we'd take your water from you so fast the ship would be halfway to Earth before you knew you'd lost."

"Oh," said Meris thoughtfully.

Frank learned Martian, and Meris English. Frank periodically crowed about the giant strides he was making compared to Meris. But in his calmer moments he admitted that his task was a thousand times easier than the girl's. For one thing, he started with a good working knowledge of Martian, while Meris knew only a few words of the "Yes, no" variety of English. For another, Martian was logical, invariable, and exact, the reverse of English, which had to be learned not by rule but by exception. Finally, Meris was a good teacher and he wasn't.

In consequence, although after a fortnight he could probably pass, Meris admitted doubtfully, as a Martian, and she could only stumble through simple statements in English, she had actually made more progress than he had.

They talked one day entirely in Martian, the next in English. Meris was puzzled when Frank told her she was only learning the main Earth language, by no means the only one.

"But don't all your people speak it?" she asked.

"They do now. We have a few Frenchmen and Germans and Spaniards, but each is so outnumbered that English is becoming the only language."

"Why didn't that happen on Earth?"

"Some time when we have a couple of years spare I'll try to tell you. But even then I might be wrong."

"Why didn't you agree on one language?"

"Ah, but which language? Wars have been fought over things like that."

Meris pondered. "Your people seem to be pretty keen on war," she remarked. "You even bring it to us."

"And I'll tell you something no Martian seems to have noticed, Meris. It was a good thing for you. The Martians are twice the race they were when we came."

"I suppose," agreed Meris thoughtfully, "we are."

Then they had their biggest fight ever. Everything came up in it

again, everything they had argued about or even discussed calmly before, and many things which had not so far been mentioned. The war, the Earthmen who found friendliness and turned it to fear and hate, their betrayal of their races, Frank's last attempt to kill Meris which had caused their crash, Frank's strength and Meris's weakness—everything that could be used to start a quarrel or keep it going.

They never knew exactly how it started. They were in the sun-room, but not sunbathing, for a few days earlier they had become dark enough to pass as Terrans, and not quite too dark for Martians. They were talking in English, when suddenly they were arguing, and Meris dropped into Martian to carry on the argument better. Frank reminded her of their rule, and she said it was all very well for him to insist on it, when he could argue in either language, or even without saying a word.

That struck Frank's sense of humour, and the quarrel might have ended before it was properly begun, but then Meris cut him by saying he was using her to discover the Martian reservoirs, and would bring the Earthmen to them, regardless of anything he had said to her or to the Healer.

Then suddenly each was searching for the things that would hurt, and finding them with unholy glee.

"No wonder you keep yourself covered up—I expect you're hideous." That was Frank.

"An Earthman's word . . . Anyone who takes it deserves what he gets."

"You want me to hit you, so that I'll show myself a bully."

"You're only interested in me when I'm in bed with you." That was a bitter cry from Meris.

On it went until they had exhausted all they could use as fuel. Then, inevitably, Meris slapped Frank.

"That makes you very brave," he told her coldly, and went to his own room for only the second time since he wakened. He heard Meris sobbing in the night, and only then realised they had fought as husband and wife, not Earthman and Martian.

The next morning the outer door was open.

## VI.

The planes were still there, exactly as they had left them. That meant that neither the Martians nor the Earthmen had reconnoitred to see if Frank or Meris, wounded, had gone to the Healers. But that was routine. Both had expected to see the wreckage gone.



"I know why it was," said Frank bitterly. "Smith, my chief, would say: 'Conn—a traitor? Impossible.' And he'd refuse to allow anyone to waste petrol even looking."

"Same with me," said Meris quietly. "Can we patch up one of the machines to fly, do you think?"

Frank knew what was in her mind. They were not known traitors—yet. But sooner or later there would be a check on some other pilot, Martian or Earthman, who had disappeared—to see if he had turned tail and run to the Healers. It was forbidden to the Martians as much as to the Earthmen. The Healers cured almost dead men, but never, it was said, without payment of some kind.

If they took one of the planes away, one of them, at least, might not be known as a traitor. And Meris's was the less damaged plane.

"Not worth it," said Frank, taking the surface meaning. "We'd be shot down by one side or the other." Then, taking the deeper meaning: "Besides, there's another way."

He moved to the nearer plane, which was Meris's. With Terran strength he scooped out the sand. In a thousand years, if left alone, the planes would look exactly the same, with no winds on the dry

Martian desert to blow sand over them. Likewise, as Frank dug a hole with his hands, the sand stayed put, with no breeze to move it, no moisture to cake it and make digging difficult, and only a small gravity to pull at the hill he made. Meris saw what he intended, and helped. The bone-dry sand was as easy to handle as dust, and in a few moments they had a hole big enough to receive the whole plane.

Meris looked about for something to use as a lever. "It's not necessary," Frank told her. With one easy heave he had tumbled the plane into the hole prepared for it. It would have needed six men on Earth.

"You were right last night," said Meris. "It was brave of me to hit you. It could have been suicidal."

Her tone made it an apology. Frank grinned, and realised they were friends again. For a while, anyway.

They buried Frank's plane also, and moved away from the hills.

What to wear had been a problem, not in this case a matter of prestige or social correctness, but a matter of life and death. There were Martian clothes, and Terran clothes. East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet. There was nothing they could wear that would make them either Martian or Terran. Nothing except . . .

When the Martians began to copy the Earthmen's machines, they found that the Earthmen's clothes for the job were better than their own. So they made overalls exactly like the Earthmen's. Underneath, too, like the Earthmen, they wore heavy shirts and shorts.

So it was as fliers that Frank and Meris had left the caves. There were disadvantages, but they had no choice. In their packs, with a little food and water, they carried other clothes, so that they could become Martians or Terrans in a few minutes. It was dangerous, for a search was bound to prove inconvenient, at the very least. But that was necessary too. They had three hundred miles to go, and they must meet a lot of people in three hundred miles—even on barren Mars.

They set off due south. As they travelled it would become warmer every day. But not much. The fires of Mars were dead, and the thin atmosphere absorbed little heat. But the air was so still that it was never really cold on Mars. Air is a bad conductor of heat, and if one stayed still, one stayed warm. The actual temperature, Frank decided, must be just above freezing, since their water was cold but still liquid. But the apparent temperature, by Earth standards, was

well above fifty, anything up to sixty-five. The body adjusted rapidly to new conditions, and on Mars, since it was always cold, it was easy to lose surplus heat. On the other hand, since the air was dead and slightly warmed by the sun, it was just as easy to shut the pores and conserve heat. Even an Earthman, Frank knew by experience, could be just as warm naked on Mars as in a temperate zone on Earth—though there must be thirty or forty degrees of difference in actual temperature.

It led to speculation about how many strange planets would prove suitable for humans. Theoretically, an Earthman should wrap himself up warmly for Mars. But if he did, he would die.

They reckoned on doing thirty miles a day. It was not a difficult goal. Frank could do fifty or sixty without trouble.

The whole of the first day was spent merely walking and resting. They saw no sign of life, heard nothing in the thin air, encountered nothing but sand. They stopped and lay down when they were tired. It made no difference on Mars whether they chose the shelter of a rock or lay in the open—for there was nothing against which to shelter.

But the next day, they knew, came the first test . . .

## VII.

No one who didn't know Otha was there was ever likely to find it. It was camouflaged so that a plane could fly directly over it at a height of fifty feet and never suspect it was there. And as for the ground approaches, Meris and Frank were in the village when they first saw it. The rock was rough here, and the approaches were designed to make anyone travelling on foot take a slight detour round Otha.

Now Meris was Enda and Frank called himself Mor. They still wore their overalls. Their story, if they needed one, was that they had crashed on a flight of reconnaissance over the Healers' caves. But Martians didn't ask questions. It just wasn't a Martian habit.

A tall Martian as dark as Frank introduced himself as Theln. He greeted them quite casually, as if he had been expecting them. That was conventional. Martian hospitality was like nothing Frank knew of Earth's. A guest was a temporary member of the family, no less, no more. There was no special effort to make him feel at home or to impress him. He was there, and that was all there was to it.

They were introduced to two or three people, so that if they came to Otha again they would not be strangers. A party of six went to Theln's home for a meal. That was conventional, too, but . . .

Frank felt suspicious. It was inevitable when a world was at war, even if the war had not yet touched Otha. But there was something more in this suspicion. Frank said little, leaving the talking to Meris.

They ate, and the tension grew. Meris didn't appear to notice it. She talked gaily and laughed often, a Meris Frank hardly knew.

"You have no cars, of course," she observed, towards the end of the meal.

"No," Theln replied carefully, "not here. All the machines we have made are engaged in the struggle with the Earthmen."

It was a strange thing to say to a Martian. It was like an explanation to an Earthman. Frank fought to be casual and friendly.

"We must continue on foot, then," Meris said easily. She rose.

"You don't continue at all," said Theln softly. "You are a Terran, and the man with you is a traitor."

Surprise made it easy for Frank to act the right part. Curiously, they had it the wrong way. Meris was the Martian, not Frank.

"Everyone who leaves the Healers must come this way," said Theln. "We stop them all."

"But we . . ."

"We know," he went on, "that the Healers demand allegiance in return for their services—they demand it from Earthmen and Martians. Sometimes it is difficult for us to know we have spies and traitors in our midst. We have to work on small things. You who call yourself Enda—you are too dark to be a Martian."

"When you fly so that the wind whips your face and the sun always beats down on you," Meris retorted, "you become dark."

Theln nodded. "You will go with ten of our women," he said gently, "who will discover if your tan could come from flying a Martian plane."

"Ten!" exclaimed Meris. "Are you sure that'll be enough?"

"Even if you are a Terran woman," said Theln, "I think it will—just."

Frank watched as Meris was led away. They were ignoring him as long as he stayed still. They had made a mistake, but how could it have been avoided? Meris, pale as she had been, could never have passed for an Earth girl, and that would be necessary later. If the women saw Meris's brown legs they would be sure she was no Martian.

But it was a great indignity to strip a Martian. They might—just possibly they might see her shoulders and back were white and be

satisfied. The only thing to do was wait.

When the women returned with Meris he found it hard not to sigh in relief. They were treating her with more friendliness.

"Her arms and face are dark, no more," one of the women reported.

"Never before," said Meris passionately, "have I been stripped to the waist and had others stare at me. An Earth woman would not mind. They say they feed their babies in public, and work with the men all but naked. But I . . ."

"You may still be acting very well," said Theln. "It won't take us long to find out."

Four of them positioned themselves about her, and suddenly Theln snapped a question at her. Frank watched tensely as they interrogated her scientifically. Every pause was measured. Sometimes they allowed no time for an answer. Between them they accelerated her responses until she was flashing them out, white and angry, before the question was complete. There was no time to think.

Frank knew with complete certainty that if they had used the same technique on him he would have given himself away in a matter of seconds.

But Meris was a Martian, and all she had to remember under the barrage was that her name was not Meris, but Enda. She could answer everything else without having to think—for all they were trying to establish was that she was no Martian.

At last the questions stopped abruptly, and Theln said:

"I am sorry, Enda. I can only ask you to forgive us."

Meris, again acting beautifully, bit back hot words and with apparent sincerity said: "Well, I'm naturally annoyed, but I understand. Suppose I had been a Terran . . . But you must have something particular to hide, or you would never have been so thorough."

Theln nodded. "We have fully a thousand gallons of water," he said. "You can appreciate our caution. Remember it, in case Otha should ever ask for aid from your planes."

"We'll remember," said Frank. "But we have six thousand gallons at Mintan. Only if we lose that will the Earthmen seek more water further north. And if we have lost it, we shall be dead and unable to help you."

"True," Theln agreed. "You are continuing at once?"

"Yes," Meris said. "We want to reach Hola tonight."

"You will need water."

"No, we have enough left to reach Hola."

That clinched it. If they didn't take water when it was offered, they couldn't be Terrans.

When they were clear of the village Frank heaved a sigh of relief and remarked: "You handled that very well. You were perfect; all the way through."

Meris smiled at the compliment.

"But look here," Frank went on, "if we have to go through that every time, sooner or later someone's going to try that interrogation on me. Then we're sunk."

"There's only one way," said Meris. "I must train you for it. Knowing the language is not enough. You must know everything in the life of a Martian. To begin with. . ."

As they trudged on, now on desert again after the rocky islet around Otha, she told him all that went to make a Martian. There was a lot of it—twenty thousand years more of history than Earth could boast, and so much more learned in it.

But the Martian's only science had been the science of living. And there, in a war, the Earthmen scored—by centuries of study of everything else.

### VIII.

At Hola they had no trouble. Adroit mention of Otha and of Theln removed any suspicions the Holans might have had.

But at the next village, Cirl, their mission would probably have come to an abrupt end but for the fact that Cirl was already occupied with someone else.

They approached the village with trepidation, knowing that it was, in a sense, the Martian counter-espionage depot. Suspects were often sent to Cirl when they had failed to betray themselves elsewhere. The Earthmen had tried to bomb it time and again. But it was even better hidden than Otha, and the bombs had done nothing but tear up miles of desert and dead rock.

To pass through it on the way south was asking for trouble, especially as Frank had no hope yet of passing the intensive interrogation Meris had undergone in Otha—and that was only the first of a series of checks that might well be applied in Cirl. But there was no other way.

They took precautions they had not hitherto taken for the two villages they had passed through. Before entering the village they circled it and buried their packs, leaving themselves only with a little food, their guns and the overalls they wore. When they entered Cirl they carried nothing which was not of Martian origin.



They found immediately that there was something going on. They were greeted absently by people who had something on their minds. They soon found what it was.

Two Terrans, a man and a woman, had been captured. Like Frank and Meris, they had come from the north. They must have been lucky or very clever to reach Cirl—but they were going no further.

"They speak Martian perfectly," their informant told them. "But in interrogation they failed. We tried other tests. There is no doubt. They came from the Healers, and they are Terrans."

The man they were talking to was more like an Earthman than a Martian himself, Frank thought. He was dark and heavy, and there was a grimness about him common among the Earthmen, but usually lacking in Martians. But then—this was Cirl.

There was no way of avoiding witnessing the execution—for of course the spies were to die, and at once. Frank, who knew what was coming, would have taken any reasonable way of avoiding it. But that would only mean that he and Meris would die too.

It was a shock, however, when he saw the prisoners. He knew them both. Since there were some eleven thousand Earthmen on the planet, the chances of that had seemed small. But after all, the fliers all knew each other, and it was not surprising that the two who had been captured were fliers also.

The man was Bob Hasker, who had once been his gunner in a two-seater. The girl was Betty Kemp . . . the one girl he would have chosen not to see in such circumstances.

They wore Martian clothes and were tied Martian fashion—arms folded and strapped together. The Cirlans were gathering silently, watching them with hot, hate-filled eyes. And as Bob looked up, his eyes met Frank's.

For a moment Frank thought Bob had failed to recognise him. Then he knew that Bob, in the instant of recognition, had stilled any start, any flicker of surprise, that would have given Frank away to the watching Martians. Frank saw no sign pass between him and Betty. But a moment later, she looked at him too, and her gaze, like Bob's, held only the curiosity that any Terran flier would feel for a Martian flier in a village far from planes and fighting.

This, thought Frank greyly, was going to be tough.

There was a whisper in Frank's ear. "We'll leave you with them. You may be able to learn something. They say there is a comradeship between fliers."

In a few moments Frank and Meris were alone with the Terrans.

Meris, now that there was no one to see, allowed herself to look puzzled.

But Frank wasn't puzzled. Neither were Bob and Betty. The two prisoners brightened with hope, but Frank went grey.

"You came from the Healers?" Frank demanded, in Martian.

At the abrupt question Betty closed her eyes in utter defeat. Bob answered steadily: "No. We crashed on a reconnaissance flight over the caves."

"There seem to be a lot of crashes there," Frank remarked. "That's our story too. Fliers crash, but none of them ever go near the Healers."

Bob shook his head wearily. "We saw two planes," he said.

They went on talking in Martian, only Frank understanding the purpose of the talk. Bob and Betty still said nothing that indicated their knowledge of Frank. They had apparently decided that Meris, though she might be an Earth girl from her appearance, was a Martian and would report all that was said.

Soon the Martians were back, and one of them came up to Frank. "Well?" he asked.

"I don't think they saw the Healers," he remarked.

"What does it matter?"

"Nothing. But in that, at any rate, your story is wrong."

"Do you think they're not Terrans?"

"Oh, they're Terrans all right. Look at their skins."

The whole scene was a nightmare to Frank. His mind refused to believe that in a few moments Bob and Betty—particularly Betty—would be dead. Betty was twice as lovely as Meris. That didn't matter except that it made it seem wholly out of the question that in a few minutes her beautiful body, so healthy and strong now, would have begun to decay.

It was worse than he dreamed. First they stripped the prisoners. It made little difference to Bob and Betty. They hardly seemed to notice. But it was the greatest indignity the Martians knew. It brought a choked gasp from Meris. Then they were rubbed with filth. And only then did the executioner draw his gun and shoot them each five times, every shot fatal but none immediately so.

It must have been half an hour after the first shot before they were quite still. All that time the Cirlans, and Meris and Frank, watched.

The man who had spoken to them before, Amon, turned to Frank and Meris.

"You didn't like that," he remarked pleasantly. "I was watching you."

The remark was addressed to them equally. Frank left Meris to answer it. Her reaction would be more authentic than his.

"It was bestial," she whispered passionately.

"You don't think they deserved to die?"

"Of course they had to die. And it makes no difference to them now how they died. But it makes a difference to us, who watched it. Martians. I have fought the Terrans, but . . ."

"According to reports," said Amon, "the Terrans have often behaved much worse towards our prisoners."

"Perhaps. But they are Terrans. We are Martians, an older civilisation, with more to be proud of. More to remember, more to keep clean and unspoiled. Now you are spoiling it. In the air the battle is clean. But this . . ."

"What do you say, Mor?" Amon asked.

"I agree. Shoot them, of course, but do it cleanly. I had a companion whom the Terrans shot. They did it cleanly. They put him up against a wall, bandaged his eyes, and shot him so neatly that he never felt the pain. This . . ."

Their reaction must have been expected, for when they left the village no one seemed to harbour any suspicions of them.

Meris was silent for so long that at last Frank had to ask her what she was thinking about.

"I don't understand you," she muttered. "You could have done something. You and I could have helped them to escape. We could have released them when we were left alone with them, and at least . . ."

Frank shook his head. "Can you really fail to see what the Cirlans were doing?" he asked. "You, of all people, should know. We were meant to help them to escape. Then the Cirlans would have known beyond doubt . . ."

Meris looked at him for a long time, then nodded. "Yes," she admitted. "Sorry, Frank. I shouldn't make it more difficult for you. It must have been difficult enough."

"You don't know how difficult," Frank said.

She recoiled at the passion in his voice. She had never known such depth of feeling.

"And now you hate Martians, all Martians," she whispered, "as you never hated them before. I understand."

"No," said Frank. "I've met people like the Cirlans before—among my own people. War makes them. It's war I'm beginning

to hate, Meris. I'll give the Healers the propulsion unit if I can—not because I have to, but because I want to. Yes, the Cirlans are cruel. But war taught them cruelty, the war we brought. If I had killed you in the air, Meris, would it really have been cleaner than what we've just seen?"

Before such an outburst Meris was silent, almost frightened. She left Frank to think his own tortuous thoughts. But she knew that neither of them had seen the two Terran fliers writhe in mortal agony for the last time. Frank and she were used to war, but not that. When they were tired or anxious or frightened, the picture would return to them of the man and girl dying as they had died, among enemies.

The incident raised another problem, when they were calm enough to consider it. Others must have gone to the Healers, even if Bob and Betty had not. But now Frank and Meris knew what the Healers wanted. They were only interested, it seemed, in the propulsion unit from the Earth spaceship. That meant that everyone who had hitherto gone to the Healers had been sent for the same thing, and had failed . . .

## IX.

Soon they knew why so many had failed. At every village there was a new difficulty. Every time they met Martians they had to pit their entire knowledge of Mars and Earth against a determined effort to seek out spies. They realised very soon why there had been little espionage.

Only a hundred miles from the Earthmen's base Frank underwent intensive questioning for the first time. He came through. He thought he had failed, but it appeared that the things he had not known had been a few things which Meris had deliberately not told him, since there was such a thing as being too perfect . . .

And then they were at a point where they might at any time encounter Earthmen. This was a new danger. Why they had got so far was obvious to them both. Two Martians would have failed. Two Terrans would have failed, but between them they had all the knowledge, all the courage and all the experience necessary for the almost impossible job.

Perhaps never before had the Healers been able to make a team of an Earthman and a Martian. Perhaps they were going to succeed, after all, in face of all the difficulties—and that might be the reason.

They slept one night in a hollow, not for shelter, but because if any patrols, Martian or Earthmen, were out, they didn't want to be

taken by surprise. Even the first words, before they knew whether they had Martians or Earthmen to deal with, might count.

And Frank, who had been awake first and went up to have a look round, came tumbling down the slope.

"Earthmen," he panted. "It's our chance—if we can take it."

"What do you mean?" Meris demanded, only half awake.

"Let them find us—and be sure we're Terrans. Quick, we haven't time to waste."

He was throwing off his overalls, stripping to his shorts, bundling everything but the overalls into his sack and burying it in the sand. As he worked he talked.

"You're an Earth girl now, remember? I think your language will pass—if only you don't ever give them a chance to suspect you're anything else. You're Helen Simson and I'm Joe Hollins. We've come here for privacy. Get changed. Wear something no Martian girl could wear—don't you see?"

She started.

"You're an Earth girl," he insisted. "Quick, or you won't have the chance. Your very reluctance, when your life may depend on it, proves it's the right thing to do."

When Tom Benson and his men looked into the hollow as a matter of course, Frank and Meris were sucking at each other's lips. Benson never had any doubts—why should he? The man wore stained shorts, and the girl with her arms pressed into his back wore trunks and a disarrayed halter. No Martians these.

"Hi," he called. "Break it up."

"Go chase yourself," said Frank indistinctly. "Who are you, anyway—chairman of the Extraterrestrial Purity League?"

The men grinned as they climbed down into the hollow.

"You're pretty far from home, aren't you?" Benson observed—but not suspiciously.

"Sure—we walked twenty miles to be pretty far from home. How far do we have to go to get some privacy—back to Earth?"

Frank stood up. Meris brushed sand off her arms and grinned at them.

"I'm Tom Benson," said the Earthman.

"Joe Hollins. This is Helen. I won't tell you her other name. She's booked."

"So I see. I suppose you know if you got much farther north you'd run right into the Martians?"

"Okay. Be a spoilsport. You going back? Guess we could stand some company, if you put it that way." He picked up his overalls.

Frank had been right. Before Meris even spoke the Earthmen were so convinced that she was Terran that even if she had talked in broken English it would never have occurred to them to suspect she was a Martian. But when she did speak, her words were soft and liquid, and there were others among them besides Frank who seemed ready to listen to her.

Frank knew he was playing with fire. He had debated long in his mind whether to be Frank Conn or not. At any time he might meet someone who knew him. Then it would be much better to be Frank Conn than anyone else, however much explaining there might be to do.

But Frank Conn must long since have been reported missing. And when people went missing, they stayed missing. It was not unknown for someone to get back, particularly from the south. But from the north it was rare—there were too many Martians to pass. And for all the Earthmen who had ever succeeded in passing the Martians, the races might have belonged to different species instead of being identical.

No, the plan was to take a chance, get straight to the spaceship, remove the propulsion unit and get straight back.

As he and Meris trudged back to base with the scouting party, Frank wondered again. Why had the Healers, with their fantastic powers, failed so far to get possession of the one thing they wanted? Or had all their agents different orders? But Frank didn't believe it. No, they had all been stopped before getting back to the Earth party. So the Earthmen didn't even know that the propulsion unit was what the Healers wanted. Hence it might be possible to get it. The spaceship was guarded—but against Martians, not Earthmen.

They didn't take long to reach base. After twenty years it was still 'base.' The Earthmen hadn't reached the stage of regarding their stay on Mars as having any permanency. They had not begun to build for keeps. The base was where the ship had landed twenty years ago, and it had still no name.

Perhaps behind that there was a desperate insistence that they were only there temporarily. Perhaps they refused to believe, however it might look, that it was possible they might remain on Mars for the rest of their lives.

At first it had been only a matter of a few days to collect water from the Martians and set off for Earth. They might return and

set up a proper colony on Mars, but first they had to know what was happening on Earth.

But here they were—and Frank remembered that he and Meris were going to do their best to keep the Earthmen here for ever.

As they reached the huts Frank had a big slice of luck. Someone going the other way waved to him, and he waved casually back. Obviously Bill Hilton hadn't heard he was missing. But it was one more thing to destroy any possibility of suspicion as far as the party they were with was concerned.

Frank and Meris, now in their overalls, left them when they liked. The great bulk of the spaceship hung over the base. The Martians no longer attacked it. The ground round the base was strewn with wreckage of Martian planes. They couldn't achieve anything against the Earthmen on their own ground, and they had stopped trying. Defence is always easier than attack. The ship would be safe so long as there were Earthmen left to guard it.

Every moment they spent in the camp was an added danger. Frank might be recognised at any time, or Meris might give herself away. The plan, then, was simply to go straight to the ship, not in any desperate hurry, but with the sole intention of procuring the propulsion unit and getting away.

Casually they strolled towards the ship, entering its shadow long before they reached it. By now Frank knew Meris's moods well enough to be aware that she was awed. The Martians had no single scientific achievement like this to their name.

They realised the second advantage of their overalls. Not only did they enable them to pass as Terrans or Martians, but as fliers or mechanics. Fliers had no special reason to go near the ship. Mechanics had. The great ship was kept serviced at all times so that whenever the water was available to power the atomic motors the ship could leap into flight.

There were others about, not many, chiefly mechanics and cleaners who looked at them incuriously. It was not necessary to guard the ship particularly. The Martians had never attacked in force, and if they did, defence of the base would be defence of the ship. No Terran would harm the ship unless he was insane—and none in the small colony was.

Unhurriedly, confidently, they made their way along the steel corridors. Frank had not been on the ship for years, but as a child he had spent two months exploring it on the trip to Mars—and a

child remembers. They passed cleaners and others, paid no attention to them whatever, and were similarly disregarded for the most part. Once someone whistled as Meris went past. She didn't know the right reaction, so she made none—which was the right reaction.

It seemed incredibly easy. They reached the centre of the ship, a thousand feet from the nose, two hundred feet above ground. There, protected by the mass of the ship, the heart was situated.

Meris stared at the generators, banks of switches and controls, lost. "It's controlled from here?" she asked.

"No, this is the motor room. The control room is in the nose."

Frank shut the doors and turned to the motors.

There were twenty-one great atomic motors, built to operate on water. The ironic thing was that anything would do, and water had been chosen, back on Earth, only because there was so much of it and it was so easily handled.

But on Mars any of the other things which might have been used—earths of all kinds, metals, rock—were to be found in large quantities, and water was rarer than them all. On Mars water was literally more precious than gold, and there was much less of it.

The motors could, of course, be adapted to run on anything. But among the eleven thousand Earthmen on the planet there was not one atomic scientist . . .

Once there had been twenty-three motors. Two had been removed from the ship and taken well away from it. Technicians experimenting with them, one at a time, had blown themselves up and the motors as well. After that there had been no further experimentation.

But the motors only supplied power, and power undirected is nothing. The twenty-one motors could be running and supplying their fantastic load, but the ship would never move—it would be turning itself into a vast battery, which, sooner or later, must overload itself.

Frank didn't understand the principle of the propulsion unit. He only knew that in the very core of the ship, accessible from this room, was a small bar like a rolling-pin which must not be supplied power, if you wanted it to stay put. Whenever the faintest trickle from the motors reached it, it became restless, determined to move along its axis.

And when the motors were roaring at full capacity (but that never happened, even in space flight), the little bar dragged the whole vast ship through space at higher accelerations than the human frame could stand—or the ship, for that matter.

The men who had made that bar weren't here. The Terrans on





Mars knew nothing of its secret—but they could use it if they had water.

Meris watched as Frank unscrewed a section of housing, pulled it open and climbed inside. Bending so that he was almost hidden in the casing, he went on working with spanners and drills. Meris couldn't help. There was only room for one.

At last he said "There!" and held up a grey cylinder about a foot long and with a cross-section of three inches. It was plain and smooth as plastic and not particularly heavy.

"It doesn't look much," he said, "but without it, the ship will never move again."

"Wrong," said a voice. "But the question doesn't really arise."

The door by which they had entered was open again, and standing in it were two men who held guns that covered Frank and Meris. They were only two. But they might as well have been two hundred.

Frank stepped out of the housing, still holding the propulsion unit.

"What the devil do you want?" he demanded.

One of the men shook his head. "You don't get away with that," he said. "No one is empowered to touch the unit—*no one*. You needn't give us the story about being a technician with orders to take it out and test it, because if anyone had permission to touch the unit, we'd be the first to know."

Still Frank was going to bluff, there being nothing else to do. But the second man silenced him.

"Besides, Martian," he remarked, "we're not as dumb as we look. That isn't the unit. Only Phil and I know where the real one is, and when anyone wants it they'll come to us."

It sounded like the truth. Frank tossed the bar aside. "Do I look like a Martian?" he demanded disgustedly.

"No. But you wouldn't have got this far if you did. Nor your girl friend. We'll get your story out of you, never fear. We always do."

"Does this happen often, then?" Meris asked. She had caught a quick glance from Frank and interpreted it. She was to hold the men's attention.

"Don't answer, Jack," said the man called Phil. "They're only stalling."

"No, I've got a point all right," said Frank steadily. "You're sure I'm a Martian? Absolutely certain?"

"Who else could you be? Unless a traitor, and we don't go in for those."

It was the answer Frank expected. The guard, then, was placed because of isolated Martian attempts to obtain the propulsion unit. Not all Martians knew it existed—Meris hadn't. All they knew was that anyone who went to spy among the Earthmen failed to return, except for very rare cases, when nothing of importance was learned.

This, then, was what happened to them. They discovered the importance of the propulsion unit, tried to obtain it, and were caught in the attempt.

But the important thing was that these two men, Phil and Jack, two ordinary Earthmen with a simple job that they meant to do well, had never encountered any renegade Earthmen. No Earthmen who had visited the Healers, agreed to serve them and were sent on this mission, had got through. They believed Frank was a Martian.

"If you're sure of that . . ." he said, and acted.

Against the tiny gravity of Mars it was easy to brace his feet against a housing and hurl himself like a bullet across twenty-five feet of space. As a human bullet he presented the smallest possible target. Besides, the Earthmen believed he was a Martian, and no Martian could do as he did.

So Frank crashed into them unhurt. Both guns had gone off, but Frank had felt no pain. The guards weren't good guards, for they could be taken by surprise. With a hammer blow on Phil's wrist Frank sent one of the guns spinning along the deck, and Jack, who had taken Frank's head in his stomach, was temporarily out of the reckoning.

It was easier than Frank could have hoped. He had been desperate. Even after he hit the guards square, unhurt, he shouldn't have had a chance.

But there was Meris. Immediately Frank took the guards' attention off her, she whipped out her gun and shot Phil. He dropped, coughing. He didn't cough for long.

"I didn't mean to kill him," said Meris. "But it was better to kill him than to miss."

Frank had Jack's gun in his hand by now and was standing over the winded guard. He nodded. "Right," he said. "They would have killed us without blinking if they hadn't had orders to take anyone they found tampering with the unit and hold him for questioning. Let's get out of here."

They didn't talk; they worked out what to do with the ease of practice. While Frank tipped the dead guard's body into the unit casing, the handiest hiding-place, and fastened it, Meris stood over the other guard, who was recovering and staring up at her with hatred. He opened his mouth to shout, and before a sound came Meris struck him carefully behind the ear, with the butt of the gun.

When everything looked normal in the machine room, they dragged the unconscious guard along the corridors to the ship's

gymnasium, which was rarely opened. No Martian would have known about it—only a Terran who had played there as a child on the journey from Earth. Probably, Frank thought, he would be safe there was a week.

The guard was recovering consciousness.

"The real unit," said Frank. "Where is it?"

"In Old Mother Hubbard's cupboard," said Jack.

He was watching Frank and Meris as he spoke. Seeing Frank's annoyance and Meris's puzzlement, he burst out: "I get it. The girl's a Martian and you're a renegade. Why, you dirty . . ."

"Save it," Frank told him. "I've got a job to do. Where is the unit?"

"You don't seriously expect me to tell you."

"So seriously," said Frank, "that if you're wondering what we're prepared to do to you to make you talk, the answer is anything. We have to know, fellow. You can make it difficult for us, but you can't change that. We have to know anyway."

Meris watched unmoved while Frank beat the guard with his fists. She paled only slightly when Frank strung him across a jumping-box and lashed him with a heavy rope. But after that she had to go into another room.

The hideous part of it was, Frank was under a compulsion even stronger than the guard's. She knew that because she felt it herself. She had fought, but she had never been cruel. She had never expected to countenance torture.

But when her mind screamed to her to interfere, her body refused to obey. She knew now what the Healer meant when he said that once her promise was given she would never be able to break it. There had been a compulsion laid on her and Frank—a compulsion that was making Frank as cruel as a man could be, and prevented her from interfering—because it was necessary. Frank had guessed it, but knowledge of it didn't weaken it.

More than that, she knew that if Frank had not been there to administer the torture, and it had still been necessary, she would have done it herself. . . .

That was proved when Frank staggered out panting. "He won't break," he said. "I can't go on. You'll have to take a turn."

Meris had never hurt any creature, save in fighting for her world. It was utterly impossible for her to torture the guard. So she thought, white with strain.

But she went and did it, nevertheless.

They knew they were beginning to get somewhere when at last the guard began to tell them hiding-places—obviously lies, but a break in his silence. Once he had begun to realise that the torture could be stopped, he couldn't help talking.

At last he whispered that the propulsion unit was in one of the drawers in the dining-room of the ship. They knew this was the truth at last. The unit must be kept somewhere on the ship, so that whenever the vital water was obtained, the ship would be ready for flight in a matter of seconds.

Meris watched while Frank went to the dining-room. He was back in a few minutes. He had the unit with him.

"How do we know it's the right one this time?" Meris demanded.

"We don't. There's no way of testing it. But look at him." He nodded at the guard, who was staring at the bar in Frank's hand. If Frank merely had another replica, the guard was acting magnificently.

They left the guard tied in such a way that eventually he would be able to work himself loose. Then they set off through the ship again.

"If the absence of those two has been discovered," said Frank, "it's just too bad. There's nothing we can do about it. There's only two ways out of the ship, and if they're watched, we're prisoners. The only thing is to walk out as boldly as we walked in."

But no one stopped them. Frank had found a toolkit such as any mechanic might carry, threw out the tools and put the unit inside.

When they were clear of the ship, Meris looked at him helplessly. "So far, we're all right," she said. "But what now?"

"There's only one possibility," he said. "Steal a plane."

He told her how it might be done. It was a very simple plan. The essence of it was that if it worked, it would work quickly. They might have tried other ways. But there was no time to discuss the relative merits of different plans.

They scouted about until they found an empty hut that was used by women.

## XI.

Mechanics on the airfield looked up as the flier and the girl approached.

"Mind if I show my girl over one of the planes?" the flier asked.

They weren't looking at him. That was part of the plan.

There wasn't much glamour about life at the settlement, and most of the women were dirty and untidy and workmanlike most of the time. But there had to be some relaxation. There were concerts

and cabarets, and this girl was obviously a singer or dancer or both. She wasn't workstained. Her lips were cherry red, and if they looked natural, they were still unnaturally natural. She wore nylon stockings, and there weren't many pairs left. Her shoes were high-heeled and not meant for much more than tripping about on a stage. Her calf-length skirt was spotless white, billowing about her as she moved. Her blouse was unusually deep-cut, and on her arms were bracelets and at her neck a triple necklace.

She was a butterfly among spiders.

"Sure," said one of the mechanics. "We'll be watching you—one of you, anyway."

There was a laugh, and the girl smiled dazzlingly at them. The curious thing, not fully appreciated by anyone present but Frank, was that if they had seen the same girl as she had been half an hour before they wouldn't have given her a second glance. The glamour of clothes and cosmetics was so rare that in themselves they transformed a spider to a butterfly—granted a certain natural attractiveness as a starting-point.

The mechanics watched as the girl climbed over the plane, laughing in her silvery way. They opened their eyes wide as she jumped and her skirt flew wildly, and made coarse but envious remarks as Frank put his arms round her to lift her.

After climbing all round the plane, with the excited curiosity of a child, the girl lowered herself excitedly into the pilot's seat. The mechanics didn't move. If Frank had gone near the plane alone, they would at least have satisfied themselves that someone knew who he was, and that he had a right to be there. But the girl . . . It simply never occurred to any of them as a possibility that a creature like her could be a pilot.

Not until the motors roared and Frank leapt into the gunner's cockpit. But then it was too late. The plane was already gathering speed. They jumped up and ran after it, but they might as well have stayed where they were.

The planes the Earthmen had built were not even the best of the world they remembered on Earth. They had made planes which flew—that was all they intended to do, and all they could do. They were curious things, designed for maximum lift in the light atmosphere of Mars. They could do six hundred miles an hour, but that was only because there was so little air resistance. In the stresses and strains of Earth's atmosphere, the planes built on Mars by the Earthmen, and by the Martians copying the Earthmen, would not have survived for an instant.

But one thing about all the planes on Mars suited Frank and Meris. Unless another plane could get on their tail in two or three minutes, there was little point in any pursuit. Every plane had much the same performance figures, Terran and Martian.

No plane had come up after them as the Terran base sank out of sight over the foreshortened horizon, so they reckoned themselves safe from Earthmen.

But a second danger arose almost at once. Ahead they saw two Martian planes, directly between them and their objective, the Healers' caves.

"I won't fight my own people," Meris shouted back to Frank above the roar of the engine.

Frank swore. "Haven't I been doing that?" he demanded. "Didn't we promise to do it? You'll fight or die. We have to get through."

Meris said nothing, but she turned the plane towards the two Martian machines. It was ironic, Frank thought, that the last time he and Meris had been in an air battle they had been in different planes, trying to kill each other. Now they were together, with the same aim.

The Martian planes were single-seaters, and there should have been but one ending to the encounter. The way they separated to close in on the single Terran ship showed the experience of the two Martian pilots.

But what they did not know was that this fight was not going to be conducted according to the usual rules—destroy the pilot, but let him land his machine safe if possible. So before the Martians knew that this was a wild plane, intent only on destruction, one of them was spinning to the ground in flames, his tank struck by Frank's first burst.

The other, warned, was careful. He came within range only on his own terms. His machine was more manoeuvrable than the Terran plane, and he was able to get in a few bursts without reply. But then Meris, as experienced as the other pilot—she had obviously flown a two seater before, Frank noted—saw that the only policy was savage attack. She tied her nose to the tail of the other ship and followed it grimly through all its wild gyrations.

Frank didn't fire until he was certain. Then one burst through the Martian's propellor finished him. Probably two planes had never been put down before with as little expenditure of ammunition.

"I'm glad we didn't have to kill them," said Meris, as she righted her course. "The first pilot landed safely too, did you notice?"

That brought to Frank's notice the fact that it had only been necessary to kill one man since they started. It hadn't been the bloody affair he had expected.

There was no further incident. The flight to the caves, a journey which had taken them days on foot, was accomplished in under an hour, including the take-off and air battle. They landed neatly directly before the cave mouth, jumped from the plane, and ran into the cave.

This time it was no effort for Meris to crawl the last few yards to the bell where it stood in its niche. But it was not necessary to ring it. A door in the rock itself opened, and for the first time they saw a Healer.

## XII.

He was old, that was the first thing they noticed about him. But they had expected that. They had not expected that he would be so tired and near to death. The powers of the Healers, who had dragged them from the very jaws of death, must surely be great enough to ensure their own health. But the man before them, wearing a blue *nolor*, could hardly stand. Abruptly Frank knew why the Healers had chosen this way to obtain the propulsion unit. If they were all as old as the man who faced them, they were incapable of the journey themselves. Someone else had to do it for them.

The Healer was clearly incapable even of standing in the bracing Martian air. He motioned them inside hastily, and the door closed in the rock behind them. They were in the passage which for so long had been barred to them while they regained their strength.

"My name is Gryon," said the Healer as he led them to the sunroom which they knew so well. "You wonder about the rest of us. There are none. My last companion died a thousand years ago."

That explained it. The Healers had had vast powers in medicine, but they stopped short of immortality. Gryon had been able to live on and on, but only as a tired, decrepit old man.

They reached the sunroom and Frank and Meris threw themselves on the mats, able to relax for the first time since they left this same room. Gryon lowered himself carefully on to the only chair in the room. The light still flooded the rooms from the windows, but the garden, Frank saw, was gone. There was nothing but white light through the glass. He smiled faintly at Meris, who had never entirely believed that the garden was not there behind the glass, stared into nothingness.

"You have the unit," said the old man in Martian. "I knew it



when I saw you. Besides, if you failed, I failed. You were the last I could send. Give me the unit."

"No," said Frank. "I see you are old and unarmed. We do not wish to harm you. But we must know what is behind this. We give you the unit, for your own purposes, freely or not at all."

Meris nodded. The old man sighed. "You would find you are wrong," he said. "You could not harm me, and if I commanded you you would have to surrender the unit. You must still serve me, you see. But you may as well know. This is the end of my race, and someone should know our history."

"I must first explain something you may have discovered for yourselves," he went on. "You have memories of your promise to me, and each think you promised to give your lives. That isn't so. My power over you could never have been gained over traitors. You obeyed me because you are true to yourselves. Many men who have sought me as a Healer have died instead—because they were too twisted and untrustworthy to be of any use to me."

Frank felt a glow of relief, and saw that Meris felt the same.

"I showed you," said Gryon, "a little of the sincerity of my purpose. Otherwise you would never have agreed. I had to remove that from your memories. But now I can replace it."

"Frank Conn, what do you think has happened on Earth?"

The unexpected question put Frank wholly at a loss. "I don't know," he said. "Nobody knows. We have fought this war with the Martians as the first step towards finding out. Water means power for the spaceship, and that means knowledge of what has happened on Earth."

"But what do you think might have happened?"

"War, I suppose—so intense that space travel must be suspended for the moment. Probably an atom war. Perhaps, even, the whole world has already reverted to savagery and there will never be another spaceship."

"I haven't been to Earth," said Gryon. "I have no means of knowing what has happened there. But I am quite certain it is more than that. I am certain that there is not a single thing left living on Earth—not animal nor plant nor insect nor reptile."

Frank stared at him in horror.

"Your atom wars are nothing to this," Gryon said. "Atomics need a powerful technology. Long before a significant fraction of Earth's population could be destroyed by any kind of atom bomb, the technology would be lost and there would be no one left to make more atom bombs, no one to build planes to drop them, no

one to fly the planes. The human race has a natural defence against all highly technical weapons—simply a reversion to savagery.”

“But you say everything on Earth is dead!” Frank burst out.

“Yes—and I am merely remarking that mere atomic warfare could never have done it. The atom bomb your race feared so much could destroy civilisation—but it could never directly destroy mankind. Not mankind spread in teeming millions across a world as it was on Earth.

“I must make an apparent digression. Hundreds of thousands of years ago Mars had its one period of ascendancy in physical science. I am talking of Martian years—it was an incredibly long time ago, as human lives go. The Martians then were unlike both the Earthmen and the Martians of today. The details don’t matter. In this period, the propulsion unit was invented. Exactly as it is today. The Martians who invented it immediately set off for Earth, a friendlier planet, leaving Mars deserted.

“On Earth they evolved—not into fish and then reptiles and then mammals and finally apes and men, as your earlier scientists believed. Your later theories postulated the sudden rise of separate species, which was correct. The reptiles, the insects, and the plants were there on Earth when the Martians landed. Then men and the apes all evolved from the Martians.

“But I needn’t go into biology—that isn’t what you want to know. The original Martians became men—perfectly at home on Earth. They still had the propulsion unit. But they knew something about it which your civilisation didn’t know. So when they fought, they fought merely an atomic war.

“The result you can guess. It was inevitable. The Neo-Martian civilisation on Earth was lost. It climbed again—not directly to the one you knew, but through hundreds of different civilisations, not one of them based on physical science.

“You know nothing of the recent history of the propulsion unit, but I will tell you this. Earthmen never discovered it, because the race into which the Martians developed—the human race—is incapable of the kind of thinking which produced the unit. Can you understand that? Intelligent spiders, say, would never produce the machines of men. Machines, yes, but based on entirely different principles dictated by their radically different type of mind. The unit was lost for ever—unless someone discovered one of the original units in the ground.

“The unit, once made, is almost indestructible. So inevitably, after thousands of years, it was dug up again. I know all I say is

pure theory, but it must be true. Your human scientists could duplicate the unit, but they could never invent it or understand it."

Frank interrupted. "You hinted at some secondary power of the propulsion unit," he said. "What else can it do—apart from driving a space ship?"

"Destroy life," said the old man simply. "Just that. Not as the knife or the gun or the atom bomb destroys, but as water dissolves sugar. You would have to drop millions of atom bombs on Earth before you could say you had killed everyone. And despite your certainty, thousands of people would emerge from forests and mountains and cellars and houses and start a new civilisation.

"But if you use the propulsion unit in a certain way—it is not important for you to know how—you can destroy all life in an area as surely as you can put out street lights by cutting all power. Earthmen must have discovered this, and used it in war."

He looked sadly at the two watching him. "The poor fools," he said. "They used it, thinking it was surer than the atom bomb, but still under control. They knew that they could control the area of destruction.

"But what they didn't know was that nothing could stop that area growing."

They started, realisation dawning on their faces.

"Limit the area to three square inches," said the old man sadly. "It will still grow like an inkblot. Life will run from it. Even the most stupid animals will learn that there is danger and run. They will keep on running until they come to the sea. Then only the more intelligent animals can go further. Men, in fact. But no matter how far they go, death will follow them. And in the end the blot will cover the whole world."

"How long?" Frank whispered. His question wasn't clear, but Gryon had no difficulty in understanding it.

"It would depend on the size and number of the original areas," he said. "But the largest estimate would be ten Earth years."

Frank lay and in his mind's eye saw Earth without a living plant, animal or insect on it. There was no disbelieving Gryon.

"But you," he said. "Who are you?"

"You must have seen already," said the old man, "that the propulsion unit was rediscovered twice. We Martians are not the original Martians who went to Earth. We developed from them—on Earth. Thousands of years ago the unit was found among ruins and its purpose established. Ships came to Mars. Here on Mars we

realised the theoretical possibilities of the unit—and sent a group of scientists to Venus to investigate them there. We were wise. There is no more life on Venus than on Earth now—unless it has developed again since then.

“So every unit on Mars was destroyed.” The link with Earth was broken again, and for the most part the Martians lost their civilisation and had to build it up again. But not the Healers. We kept apart, remembering all that I have told you. Mars was safe—but what of Earth?

“Earth must have lost the secret of the propulsion unit, and knowing that, we hoped that its menace was gone for ever. But somewhere on Earth examples must have remained—and you know the rest.”

“This is all you have wanted?” Meris asked. “To know that the last propulsion unit would do no more damage? But that can only have been your purpose for the last twenty years. The legends of the Healers . . .”

“I know,” Gryon said. “There have always been Healers. But until the Earthmen came, I had no specific purpose. I was only waiting. Sometimes Martians came and were cured—but very seldom, for when there was no war, there were no broken bodies.

“But then the ships came to Mars, and I knew the unit was still a danger. I waited—and waited too long. Then at last I learned that there was only one unit left on Mars, and guessed that Earth had discovered the destructive power of the unit—and paid the price. I had failed Earth. But I must not fail Mars. I sent everyone who came to me on the same mission as you. They all failed, until at last an Earthman and a Martian girl were sent together.”

### XIII.

The story was complete. Frank nodded his head slowly. “And now what?” he said. “What are you going to do?”

“I have only one purpose left—to destroy that last unit.”

“But you said it is practically indestructible.”

The old man nodded. “There is only one way it can be destroyed. It is destroyed on Earth now, and on Venus. This must be destroyed in the same way—by its own horrible power.”

“And kill Mars too?” Meris demanded.

“No. I shall take it to one of the other planets. Earth or Venus. It doesn’t matter. They are safe now. Already it would be possible to live on them, and if I had more time, and more trust in the

human race, I should use the unit first as it was meant to be used, and repopulate Earth. Then it could be destroyed elsewhere.

"But I have no time. I can only go to Earth and start the whole hellish business over again—but on a dead planet, where there is no one to die but me."

Meris was going to speak, but Gryon waved her into silence. "Don't be emotional," he said. "I am only cutting a too-long life short by a few weeks."

"Nevertheless," said Meris, "one of us should come with you. Suppose you die on the way?"

"I have allowed for that. In that case the unit will be energised as a destroyer of life and the effect will be the same. But there is a risk which I won't explain. To avoid it I must live until I reach Earth. I shall. I have not waited so long to allow myself to die before I am ready."

"You have a ship?" Frank asked.

"Yes—a small ship operating on sand instead of water. It is thousands of years old, but it is still perfect. I shall leave in a few minutes."

He rose shakily and surveyed them. "As for you," he said, "if you return to your peoples they will kill you. Tell them what you wish, they will still believe you are traitors and will insist on death. But the war between Earthmen and Martians will soon be over. There will be nothing to fight for, and they can mingle as one race—which they are."

"They will still kill us," said Frank evenly.

"No." The old man crossed to the blank wall of the room and fumbled with the smooth surface. An unsuspected door slid open. "That is the way to the rest of this retreat," he said. "You will find other things there—the apparatus which enabled me to save your lives, for one. But another thing you can do is change your appearance so that you will never be known as Meris and Frank Conn. How you handle the situation is your responsibility. Eventually you must let your friends into the secrets you will find here. But there is no hurry, and you can produce the various techniques as your own invention if you wish."

He sighed. "I haven't planned that part," he said. "I was concerned only about one thing. How the knowledge is disseminated and used is something you must work out for yourselves. But you can do it. I have left all the instructions you will need."

He must have wished to avoid farewells, for suddenly he had

stepped through the opening and closed it behind him. They were staring at a blank wall.

Frank jumped to it, but it wouldn't open. "I expect it's set to open when he's gone," he said. "Let's go out and watch."

As they stood out in the desert, clear of the caves, a hum started and a few seconds later a small ship shot from an opening high in the rock face. It was not spectacular. Just a small ship making its last journey.

Frank's gaze met Meris's. "It's no tragedy," he said. "He must be happy at last."

They turned their steps towards the plane which had brought them. It had to be destroyed, or it would be seen and a little more of their story would be known. It didn't take long to remove all trace of it. Then they went back to the caves.

"You believe what he said about Earth?" Meris asked.

"Of course. Before you and I came here, we all knew that something like that must have happened. If Gryon is wrong, he will discover it when he reaches Earth. Then he may need our help again. If he returns, it will mean there are still other propulsion units to be destroyed. But I don't think he will return."

They entered the shadow of the caves and closed the door in the rock behind them. "It looks," Frank remarked, "as if you and I will be forced to live the rest of our lives together."

Meris jerked angrily. "It does," she admitted. "Tough on you, isn't it?"

He grinned. "I wouldn't say so. After all, you may be pretty hideous now, but if what Gryon said was true, I can turn you into quite a good-looking woman."

She smiled, realising there was nothing behind the banter. Or perhaps that there was something behind it, something which had been called a lot of things but sometimes love. "We should be all right," she said. "If we wait until Mars has been at peace for a while no one will have any reason to care whether we are Terran or Martian. Which is as well, for after what has happened we hardly know ourselves." She frowned suddenly as a thought struck her.

"I've been thinking about what Gryon said of the unit," she said slowly. "I suppose we can trust his statement that the human race will never rediscover it."

"He should know. Unless we develop into something else we'll never work along the particular scientific lines which lead to the discovery."

"But there was another thing. He said it was practically indestructible. Except when it has started an infection spot which will spread wherever there is life. The plague, or whatever it is, must live on life. But how can we be sure that the unit will be destroyed? How do we know all the units on Earth *were* destroyed? Does it consume itself, or . . ."

"Or is it," murmured Frank, following her thought, "a strange fantastic form of life itself?"

She looked at him, comprehension in her eyes. "Then it must die," she said. "It must kill everything that lives—even itself."

"But one day," Frank went on in the same quiet tone, "We'll find another way of traversing space. And then we'll take life back to the Earth. Your ancestors came from there, Meris."

His eyes were fixed on something far away. "It was a beautiful world," he said.

—H. J. Murdoch

*KIMON was a galactic El Dorado;  
a never-never land to which many  
aspired but few reached. However,  
once there, then what? . . .*

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*Junk shops often produce highly interesting, if somewhat antiquated, articles. Like old and rare gramophone records. A 'record' from the future could be a rare item, too.*

## CRIMINAL RECORD

By BRIAN W. ALDISS

---

This must all be written down quickly while I have the chance. Let me see how it began . . . Yes, the gramophone record and the smoof. Only two days ago—don't bother to check that word; I will repeat it smoof. Only two days ago . . .

Are you fortunate enough to know Cambridge? One of my favourite haunts there is Curry Passage. It boasts three very similar, very satisfactory junk shops (over the three doors the word "junk" is spelt A-N-T-I-Q-U-E-S). This particular afternoon, I made a find—quite accidentally. I had already bought a three-foot Chinese junk with a high prow and a real lantern sail I thought would amuse a nephew of mine, and a little eighteenth century milkmaid in china that was purely for my own gratification, and was just turning to go. Then I saw the pile of records behind a chest.

I put down the junk and the china maid, and began to shuffle through the pile. They were a mixed bunch, some 78's, some 33 $\frac{1}{2}$ 's, sold probably by hard-up undergraduates at the end of the Trinity term. Jazz—several Louis Armstrong's for those who



liked him—dance, Stravinsky, a cracked “Prize Song” and—I breathed faster!—Borodin’s Second Symphony, the Coates recording that is now out of the catalogue. It was in an album, neat and new. I scrutinised the first record, and it looked as if it had never been played. The shop had no player, but the price was low; I wanted that symphony, so I paid my money and carted the album off with the junk and the figurine.

That was how I got it! The next afternoon, Sunday, Harry Crossway came round as usual. That’s my definition of a friend, a man you work with all the week and are glad to see on Sundays. After a drink and after he had admired the little porcelain figurine, I pulled out the Borodin. We had the first movement on before I got the second record out of its envelope. I knew at once that it was odd, although it bore the correct red labels in the middle; when I touched them, they peeled off easily.

We were left with a chocolate-coloured freak twice as fat as the usual record, only one side grooved and those grooves most extraordinary looking. Of course, I should have noticed it in the shop, but in my excitement I had only glanced at the labels and that had been sufficient. Clearly, I had been had!

I stated my irritation in very certain terms, and spent five minutes stamping round my room. Only when I had calmed a little did Harry say, in an interested voice, “Do you mind if I try this on the table, Curly?”

Harry and I work for Cambridge’s biggest radio firm, on the experimental side. Discs, tapes, short wave, TV—plain and coloured—we are paid to tackle them all, well paid. Next time you hear of a crease-innoculator on the new TV cameras, think of Harry and Curly, the proud parents. All of which I mention merely to explain why one wall of my lounge is covered with amplifiers and the bureau is full of electrical equipment, most of it home assembled, an improvement on the commercial variety.

Even so, we did not get anything out of the mystery record. The turntable seemed unable to hold it; it slipped beneath the light pick-up. For one thing, the hole in the middle of the disc was not round but shaped like a star with sixteen points; for another, the playing groove seemed to be separated by another smooth groove of fair width on which the needle had no grip. We left it, and played “Pictures at an Exhibition” instead.

But when Harry had gone, I picked the thick disc up again and re-examined it. On the blank side was a small panel. It

yielded to my exploratory fingernail and slid up. Underneath was a label which read:

POLICE VIDEOFILE B/1191214/AAA

INTERPLANETARY

Cat: Ganymede-Eros-Earth-Venus

Cr: Sabotage. Timesliding. Murder.

Type: Humanoid Venusian experiment: smooof.

Name: Above type use only generic name, smooof.

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When I had read it, I re-read it. Then I re-read it again. Catching sight of myself in a mirror, I saw my features were suffused with an expression of blank bewilderment. "What's a smooof?" I asked the face in the glass.

"A humanoid Venusian experiment," it replied.

Was the disc a joke of some sort? And what was a videofile? And what was a videofile doing in my room? I put it on the turntable again and started it up. But again came the trouble of dodging the smooth groove; that one being the wider, into that one the sapphire generally went. Finally I succeeded in hitting the other groove.

There was a high and rapid babble of sound, together with a rasping noise. I switched off smartly. There was no reason why it should have worked. Then it occurred to me that at 78 revs. I might have played it too fast. I switched on at 33½. Now the babble resolved itself into a high, fast voice; but still that horrible rasp. Again I switched off. Possibly the sapphire was over-running the grooves; somewhere I had a finer one on a lighter pick-up. After searching excitedly through three littered drawers, I found it and attached it. Breathless, setting the speed still slower, I tried again.

This time I had it! I had, to be accurate, a number of things. I soon gathered this disc was only the sound-track for a sort of film. And I knew the police report was no joke; it threw sidelights, tantalising and confusing, on a complex future world. It threw a searching light on to a smooof that made my hair stand on end . . .

Next day I smuggled the disc down to the works, carefully avoided Harry Crossway, and took a few plates of it under the

X-Ray apparatus they use for checking valves and other equipment.

The X-Rays revealed an interior that looked at first about as complicated to me as a watch would have done to a primitive who had only just stumbled on to the use of a wheel. But the harder I looked, the more convinced I became that the disc was some sort of television receiver. There were, for instance, the normal horizontal and vertical deflecting systems employed in today's circuits, although infinitely better packed and planned.

The thin spiral that we had called our "smooth groove" proved to be a vast number of separate but linked rectangular plates. They were made of glass that seemed infinitely strong and thin. And then I had an idea, and locked myself away from my fellow men for a day. Oh, one thing I ought to mention. Foolishly—curiosity plays deadly tricks on a man!—I inserted an advertisement in the local paper. It read: "Smoofs welcome here. No spoofs." And my address.

When I had inserted that advertisement I did not fully believe. But at the end of a day and night of figuring, swearing and tinkering, I emerged believing all too fully. I felt grey; I felt bald; I felt scared. With a shaking hand, I 'phoned Harry. He was still at the workshop, but at the sound of my voice he said he would be over at once. While I waited, I took a drink and composed myself.

Very shortly, I heard Harry letting himself in. He climbed the stairs, entered, and said, handing me a note, "This was tucked in your letter flap." Then he exclaimed, "What have you got here?" and went over to my gadgets on the side table.

"Is that what you called me over about?"

"Yes," I said.

"Huh! You sounded so excited, I brought my revolver over just in case."

"We may need it yet," I answered, dazedly, my eyes scanning the note he had brought up. It was a reply to my advert. It merely said, "I shall be at your house at nine o'clock. Set no traps. Smoof."

"Oh Lord!" I whispered. It was ten past eight. Outside, the street lamps were on. It was very still.

"What's all the mystery?" Harry asked impatiently. In some ways he is a queer fellow. Slow and methodical in his work, yet otherwise reckless—a round peg with a square hole somewhere inside him.

If he was going to be involved in the affair it seemed best to tell him everything. I crossed to the apparatus. I had a large cathode ray tube resting in front of the radiogram and connected to a specially doctored image orthicon that was clamped to an extremely clumsy bit of mechanism. This last gadget was merely a long-running clockwork motor that moved my image orthicon slowly in towards the centre of the record, keeping its neck constantly in—touching in fact—the smooth groove.

"I'm going to play that disc to you now, Harry—on this."

"You got it to work?"

"Yes. It's a telefile from the police records in some future time." I paused for comment, but he made none.

"How far in the future, I don't know. Perhaps two hundred years . . . not less. You'll be able to judge. You'll see vast technical ability going hand in hand with the death of conscience—the sort of thing a pessimist might predict today. Not that there's much room on this record for more than guesses, which seems to make it more hauntingly dreadful; and although I've got it to work, it doesn't work well."

"Surprised you got it to work at all!" he said.

"I don't know. Supposing Eddison got hold of one of our present-day recordings. He'd soon fathom it."

"You're some Eddison!"

I smiled modestly and said, "Thank you. Actually it's quite simple. At least, my part of it is. Up to a point, in fact, the whole thing is easily understandable, if not duplicateable, by modern knowledge."

"Up to which point?" Scepticism in his voice.

"Harry, we've got hold of a television record from the future. It's certainly more compendious for short documents than a roll of film. The unusual feature in it is a frozen signal. It seems the signal is shot from the transmitter into a storage valve circuit; or perhaps the ability lies in the transmitter, in which case duplication will be more difficult—I'll have it all worked out, if it takes a lifetime. If I've got a life time . . ."

"Go on about the record."

"Oh yes. I've had to take the turntable pin off the radiogram and install an insulated cog in its place, over which the record just fits. As you can see, two brushes are in permanent contact with the top of the cog; they're plugged into a transformer running off the mains, so that a permanent current of 40 volts is fed into the record as it revolves. Shall I switch on?"

He did not know what was coming and his scientific interest was aroused, so he said—still clinging to disbelief—"What sort of a circuit have you got inside the record?"

As I described, I sketched on a bit of paper. "Some of the wiring I cannot understand," I confessed. "The frozen signal feeds to a video amplifier and then splits into restorer circuits—see if you don't think them the sweetest little jobs you've ever set eyes on!—and the ordinary synchronising separator and horizontal and vertical deflecting circuits—which, by the way, are self-controlled on a fluid-drive principle.

"Here the two circuits join on to what acts, as far as I can see, as the hind part of an image orthicon. There's a photocathode to take the light image and a quite ordinary electron lens system which focusses the electrons on to the target, the target being this superfine "film" glass which is our smooth groove. From then on it's all my own work. As you can see, I've broken down one of our image orthicons and fixed it so that when the turntable turns the fine-mesh screen is touching the smooth groove the whole time."

"In other words, you've got half the image orthicon in the record and the rest outside?"

"Exactly. Unfortunately, it meant a much smaller fine-mesh screen to get in the groove, so that the signal is chopped. However, you'll see enough to get a good scare. From there, it's plain sailing. These are the leads to the cathode ray tube ——"

"What about your sound circuit?"

"Same as normal—our normal. Grooves run between the video grooves. They're insulated, of course. Featherweight pick-up. Twenty-eight revs. per minute. I've just had to put a little boost on the amplifier. Shall I switch on?" My palms were sweating.

Harry stared blankly out of the window and whispered to himself, "A television recording!" Then he said, "Seems a funny thing to want to have."

"It comes from a funny civilisation," I answered.

"Switch on," he said.

The screen came alive with a shot of the police station in which the evidence on the smooof had been gathered. What a station it was, an ugly saucer-shaped metal affair built into and round the asteroid Eros, which had been pressed into a new orbit to swing it as far out as Jupiter and as near in as Mercury. Lord, but it looked dismal—and half-finished. Perhaps, after all,

I had not fixed the disc up too well, because we got a flicker of stills, some dis-continuous, and most with a shower of "noise" across them, so that you could not help getting the idea that our descendants were slip-shod, imagination outriding inclination, invention outpacing execution.

We flicked inside the Eros station. Dirt, peeling walls, and a great bank of instruments a block long, before which a broken-nosed officer slouched. "Exterminate der wrongdoer!" he said, as a voice announced him as the investigator in charge of this smooft's case.

Grimy sheds that only on this second showing I realised to be dwelling quarters. This time I caught a name too. Bristol. Pronounced Brissol. Or perhaps it was Brussels, after all. Either way—ugh! Just a lot of giant shanties with ugly plumbing, stretching out, to a mile-wide desert, after which they began again and spread to the horizon. The desert was a landing ground for rockets after their long glide in from space. We saw one come in—and plough straight into the shanties. Explosion. Fire. "Dis was smooft work," said the terse commentator.

We saw the shanties up again. There was a shot of the inside of somewhere, and then more shanties; they flickered—vanished, and there was a forest there instead. "More smooft work. Time-sliding . . ."

"Good for them!" I whispered. Those trees were the first bit of beauty we had seen.

Venus next. A human settlement, half under ground, on a mountain range. Clouds, desolation. The commentary was desperately hard to follow, the language sounding like some kind of verbal shorthand. We were evidently having a flashback. Men crawled in the muck of a ravine, erecting more buildings, drilling, blasting, and all the while weighed down with space suits. "Foul atmosphere. Carbon dioxide ner bacillae," the commentary grunted.

Inside his outpost, we saw colonists living like animals and scientists living like tramps. Atomic lighting and straw beds. A crude sort of vivisection was going on—and the subjects were human beings. A snow shower of static blurred the image. Then we were peering from the outpost across the dreary gulches of Venus. A chain of human beings passed the window in single file. They were poorly clad and wore no space suits; a close-up showed us, sickingly, why. They could breathe the unbreathable Venusian air. An operation had been performed; their nostrils

were blocked with living flesh, and a complex multi-flanged nose was grafted into their wind pipes.

"So were the first smots created," said the commentator. "Dey never returned. But dey multiplied in hidden recesses o' planet. Some o' dem cross-bred with true Venusians and formed smooofs. Smot and smooof greatest menace . . ."

We were shown pithily just what a menace they were. They started as a new race without background or tradition, loathing the planet that was now their home, but with the knowledge of hate and of the weapons of science, to which they speedily added a few kinks of their own. In five generations they had space travel and in seven they had split the space-time band and were able, in space, to travel for some distance back and forward in time. Our commentator barked an explanation of all this that seemed to consist mainly of formulae, but it was obvious that humanity had been unable to duplicate the discovery of the semi-human race. Fortunately the smot and smooof were able to time travel only from space, which meant that their big, rickety space ships moved a century back and then released a scout which could blast down and land and later rejoin its parent ship; but the warp effect involved was only operative in free space and by the enormous nuclear directors that needed a giant vessel to carry them. So the police forces of earth, spread out in grim fortresses over the whole barbarous ring of inner planets, were given sitting targets—provided the targets would sit in the present.

Under a state of affairs where your yesterday might hourly be cut from under you or your future be already shattered, humanity and its concerns suffered a staggering blow. Ethics, logic, the sane comforts of a continuous memory were now swept away. Rigid martial law was universally declared; air, army and space forces turned into an ubiquitous police force.

Harry and I sat helpless before this glimpse into chaos, where tomorrow flickered helplessly to keep up with the brutal revision of yesterday. It was by these stab-in-the-back methods that Bristol or Brussels was demolished, and other centres followed the same fate. The forces of the smooof seemed to be spreading destruction everywhere; the only hope for man was that the semi-humans seemed to have run into another race in their future who possessed weapons the smooof could not withstand.

We saw a smooof ship captured by earth's police, and its crew,

with one exception, massacred without mercy, on the spot. The exception, a smoofof some importance, being taken to Eros station. He was the subject of our criminal file; his wan, noseless features slid across the screen. There was an interval—an explosion—the station crumbled into ruin—smoofs appeared from a giant ship visible through a gaping hole—the hole disappeared, the station re-integrated—the smooofs vanished—reappeared—were shot down—vanished. Timesliding—an earthquake in human metabolism. The scene blurred and trembled, filmed crazily from a high angle on automatic; Hollywood's patient art of focus and composition has been lost in this dizzy totalitarian future. Abruptly, there was nothing.

"Time lines crossed?" Harry asked from a wrinkled face.

"Yes," I said. "It comes on again in a minute."

It did. It was quite different. Still squalor, still Eros, but all changed. Other men carried on the hunt. The same investigator had a good nose but freckles and a bald head. The very symbols on his uniform had changed.

"Der smoofo was rescued. Gone into der past—noo machines carrying them further back than ever," the commentator grunted. "Record revideoed 2/xii/12/309—we hope."

There it ended. It had only taken about twenty minutes, but in that time. I suppose we had both lost something of our souls, the same something those unhappy descendants of ours had long forgotten amid kaleidoscoping events. And in the last seconds of vision a detail I had not noticed before: across that dreary new instrument room a man walked, near enough to the recording eye for us to see his face clearly. It was Harry Crossway.

Now it is five minutes to nine. I have 'phoned the unbelieving police, more in anger than hope. One lurks downstairs, one in the bathroom—neither is armed. Harry, a man with a fear on his back, crouches behind the curtain that screens off my bed. He is nursing his revolver. I scrawl this down—it may help, somehow.

Outside, dear old Cambridge is silent. No, a car pulls round the corner. It draws up outside. A man climbs out, a man with a light scarf round his throat—no, no, it's not a man! His nose—

I reckon we haven't got a chance . . .

—Brian W. Aldiss



*It was quite a surprise for the first Earth expedition to find life on Mars. Even more surprising to discover that the Martians spoke English—of a sort. It should have produced a better understanding.*

## SIX OF ONE . . .

By A. BERTRAM CHANDLER

---

The long voyage was almost over.

Of the ten men in the rocket, Hemmings was most relieved. Eight months was too long, had been too long. Eight months of free fall with only tasteless, unsatisfying food concentrates to eat. Eight months, too, without news—or, at least, without news of the sort that would appeal to his readers. At first, with the memory of the gentle blasting off from the Space Station still fresh in his mind, with the tiny, man-made world of the Mars Rocket still novel and interesting, Hemmings had sent daily reports to his editor. But his interest had soon flagged. In this little, artificial planetoid there was nothing newsworthy—no dirt, no scandal, no violence. The huge circulation of *The Planetary News*, Hemmings well knew, demanded just these items. Sunday, in millions of respectable homes, was not Sunday unless lust and murder, described in detail by Hemmings and his fellows, were introduced, by the medium of the printed page, into the prim parlours and the too neat bedrooms. Lust and murder . . . A blow by blow account of the long, leisurely chess match between Hales, the Astronomer-Captain, and Grimshaw, the Physicist, was no substitute.

Hales, in the Control Room, swivelled in his chair to talk to the Pilot.

"I suppose," he said doubtfully, "that we'd better have that unspeakable clot Hemmings up here for the landing."

"As you say, Skipper," replied Weldon, without enthusiasm.

"I wish we didn't have to. He'll . . . jinx things."

"Superstitious?" Weldon's brows arched high over his faded blue eyes.

"No . . . It's just that I don't like him. When I think of all the people who could have been sent . . ."

"You'd've preferred the Chess Correspondent of *The Observer* . . . Or *The Times*."

"Frankly, yes. Still—it's the taxpayers who're footing the bill for this expedition. And with room for only one journalist—it's no more than fair, I suppose, that he comes from the rag with the highest circulation figures."

"Not fair on us," said the Pilot. "The man's done nothing but gripe ever since we shoved off. He wants a drink. He wants a smoke. He wants a dirty big steak with onions and French fried. D'you know what he was saying to me a couple of days ago? That we should have had a girl along—then by this time he'd've had some nice, juicy scandal—to say nothing of a murder or two—for his paper."

"He's damned lucky that there hasn't been a murder," growled Hales. "Oh, well, he's here to be used. Better let him earn some of the fabulous salary that he's being paid."

Hemmings, when the call came through on the intercom, was engaged in an argument with Trent, the Biologist, and Grimshaw.

"You're going to be a very disappointed young man," said Trent. "No beautiful princesses prancing around in a state of nature. No bems, even. No muck at all for you to stick your sharp little nose into. Just lousy lichens—or something as near to lichens as makes no difference . . ."

"Just imagine the headlines," chortled Grimshaw. "LOVE LIFE OF THE MARTIAN LICHENS. By Our Special Correspondent."

"But . . . lichens . . ." muttered Hemmings.

"They spend their time lichen each other," said Grimshaw, reluctant to abandon his joke.

"But the canals," protested Hemmings.

"There just aren't any canals," Trent told him in a superior voice. "Sorry, old boy, but that's the way it is. Just an optical illusion."

"WITH KNIFE AND FORK DOWN THE ALIMENTARY CANAL!" shouted Grimshaw. "By Our Special Correspondent."

"Shut up!" flared Hemmings. "All right, all right. How do you clever master-minds know so much? Nobody's been to Mars—yet.

I suppose you remember the flap there was about the Moonflowers—after the scientists had been telling us for years that there was no life on the Moon? Or have you, oh so conveniently, forgotten?”

“Our instruments tell us what conditions are like on Mars,” said Grimshaw stuffily.

“Do they? *Do they?* Tell me—has anybody at the Lunar Observatory ever thought of pointing his fancy gadgets at the Earth? What sort of story would they tell us, I wonder? That the Earth could not support life as we know it?”

“Don’t be silly,” snapped Grimshaw.

“I’m not being silly. Just answer my question.”

The intercom speaker crackled.

“Mr. Hemmings,” came the voice of Captain Hales, “report to Control immediately.”

“And they ask *him* to watch the landing,” Trent complained bitterly to Grimshaw before the little journalist was out of earshot.

Hemmings’ reception in the Control Room was far from cordial. Weldon grunted a greeting, his eyes intent on his instruments. Hales, saying nothing, waved a hand towards the one vacant chair.

Hemmings shrugged his narrow shoulders, let himself sink into the thick padding of the seat. He was not sorry to sit down. The gravity—a resultant of the rocket’s deceleration—was tiring after the months of free fall, even though it was only a fraction of Earth’s pull. He wished that he had a cigarette. He stared through the ports, looked without much interest at the red-orange desert down to which they were falling. He lifted his camera on its sling, snapped a quick picture of Weldon hunched over his controls.

Hales glared at him. “Put that thing down, Mr. Hemmings.”

“But, sir, this is an historic moment.”

“It’ll be even more historic if you put Weldon off his stroke and crash us. Trouble is—you won’t be around to write it up for your yellow rag.”

“Talking of writing up, sir—how long will it be before I can get Mr. Tallent to send off my report of the landing?”

“We’ve got to land first. Then it’ll take all of twelve hours to get all the scientific data off.”

Yes, thought Hemmings. You’ll make it take all of twelve hours. You . . . you stuffed shirt!

There was silence for a while, broken only by the muted, screaming roar of the drive, by the thinner screaming of the tenuous atmosphere through which they were dropping. The journalist

stared through the nearest port, hating the Captain and the Pilot, hating the ship, hating the barren world, utterly devoid of human interest, beneath them, hating himself for being such a fool as to have come on this crazy, pointless expedition. Suddenly he stiffened.

"Sir! Captain Hales! Would that be a canal? And a city?"

"Rubbish," said Hales, hardly bothering to follow Hemmings' pointing finger with his gaze. "Rubbish. A remarkably straight rift. A strange rock formation."

"There's water shining there."

"I believe the little snoop's right, Skipper," said Weldon, trying hard to keep the excitement out of his voice. "That's water, sure enough."

"Very well, then," ordered Hales. "Set us down by the . . . the . . ." He finally spat out the word as though it had an evil taste, "by the *canal*."

"Near the city!" squeaked Hemmings.

"Near the rock formation," corrected Hales coldly.

Weldon, at his controls, was sweating profusely. He turned a pale, strained face to his Captain

"I've had to switch over to manual," he said. "We had her set for typical Martian conditions—but she won't handle. She's not designed to land in atmosphere this thick."

"*Thick?*" barked Hales.

"Yeah. Thick. Damn near Earth normal, I'd say by the feel of her."

"But that's impossible. We . . ."

"Leave me alone!" yelled the Pilot. "Let me do the job, my way—or we'll not get down in one piece."

The Captain, who had risen from his chair to peer over Weldon's shoulder, sat down hurriedly. Hemmings, remembering his argument with Trent and Grimshaw, permitted himself the luxury of a grin—a grin which faded rapidly as the rocket yawed violently. He wondered what sort of obituary the boys back home would give him.

Through the port, in rapid succession, he saw flashes of desert, of the dark, straight line that was the canal, of cloudless, dark blue sky. Then there was desert again, red sand and yellow sand and brown, jagged rocks, and it was too close and coming up far too fast. Aft the drive bellowed, shaking the ship with a terrifying broken rhythm. Somebody was screaming—looking back on it all afterwards he realised that it must have been himself. He heard

Weldon say, in tones of deep disgust, "Hell! That's mucked it!" And then the crash came.

"I WAS WITH THE FIRST MEN ON MARS," the voice was saying. "By Our Special Correspondent." It was his own voice. He heard somebody else laughing unkindly, *at* him, and opened his eyes with a jerk. He had been brought down, he realised, into the rocket's general room, was lying in an untidy huddle on the curved surface of the inner shell. The ship, he saw after a few moments' confusion, was on its side.

"We were lucky," Hales was saying. "How's Trent, Doc?"

Paynton, the expedition's medico, replied. "Not so good, Captain. A nasty compound fracture. And that bang on his head's not helping any."

"Any danger?"

"No. He'll pull through, all right. Just have to be watched for a while, that's all."

"H'm. Well, Taylor, what's your report?"

"We'll not need helmets, sir," said the Chemist. "Just warm clothing. Temperature's ten degrees Centigrade. Air pressure and oxygen content almost Earth normal."

"No bugs?" His face clouded. "That's Trent's problem. Could you run a test, Doc?"

"I could—but I'd not guarantee results."

"All right, then. Full protective armour, everybody. A pity—but I'm taking no risks. You'll be staying with Trent, Doctor. Put out a call on our suit frequency if you want us back in a hurry."

"I'll stay with you," volunteered Hemmings. He thought, it's a story of sorts. FIGHT FOR LIFE IN WRECKED MARS ROCKET.

"You'll come with us, Hemmings," ordered the Captain. "We may be needing your camera."

Outside, Hemmings knew why. The official photographs had to be taken—Hales, surrounded by his gallant crew, standing beside their broken ship in attitudes absurdly reminiscent of big game hunters with some hapless pachyderm unfortunate enough to get in the sights of their rifles. The reflection of the light from the faceplates of the helmets, Hemmings hoped, would make it impossible for anybody to identify the wearers. Then there was the planting of the flag, of which ceremony Hemmings was also the official photographer, and then, at last, the eight spacemen walked, slowly and carefully in the light gravity—to the canal.

I was right, thought the journalist. It's artificial. Look at that stone parapet. And those trees—if they *are* trees—spaced at neat, regular intervals. Which way is the city? Which way is Captain Know-All Hales' strange rock formation?

The city was all of ten miles distant. Its buildings blended with the landscape, were red and orange and brown, lifting high yet without ostentation, curves and straight lines and angles all seeming to have grown rather than to have been built.

"So there *was* intelligent life here," whispered Hales, his voice barely audible in the helmet phones of the others. "So there were canal builders . . ."

Hanging over the towers of the city, suddenly, was a ship. It gleamed brightly in the rays of the sun, its apparent size rapidly increasing.

"Hemmings, quick! Your camera!" shouted Hales.

The journalist had not needed to be told. Sighting with practised ease he pointed the whirring machine at the approaching aircraft, thinking in headlines—MYSTERY OF THE FLYING SAUCERS SOLVED BY OUR SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT!

"We should have brought weapons," Hales was saying.

Thirty feet from the men the saucer grounded. It was big, all of a hundred feet in diameter. It was of lenticulate construction, with a maximum thickness of fifteen feet. The metal of its hull shone with a strange, iridescent lustre.

A door opened at its rim, plates sliding up and to one side, a ramp inched down to the sand. A great glee suffused Hemmings' being—*this* was what he had come for. The six beings stepping slowly and deliberately from the machine were human in shape, and, so far as he could see, were naked. His camera whirled. He thought happily—THE NUDISTS OF MARS, By Our Special Correspondent. Then, as the Martians approached, his face fell. Without exception, well formed as their bodies were, each one was as sexless as an egg.

The leading Martian lifted an instrument to his lips. His voice—pleasant, well modulated, with the barest touch of accent—sounded through the helmet phones of the Earthmen. "Welcome," he said, "to our planet."

A shift of vowels, thought Hemmings. Well—there's plenty of that back home. Brooklyn. Poils come from ersters. But how . . . ?

"For many years we have observed you," said the Martian. "We have listened to your broadcasts, learned your languages. We know

that you have seen our ships, our flying saucers, and that you have decided, long since, that they have been the product either of optical illusion or of imagination.

"But I am failing in my duties as host. Our air, I assure you, is breathable."

"Micro-organisms?" asked Hales.

"No harmful ones, I assure you . . ."

"Hemmings, you *fool!* Keep that helmet on!"

"Too late, Captain."

The journalist stood bareheaded, breathing the fresh air in great gulps. He saw that others of the party had followed his example. Hales himself, although he was the last to do so, removed his own helmet.

"You will come with us to the city," said the Martian.

"There is an injured man aboard the rocket," said Hales.

"We will send our doctors to assist yours. But come."

"All right," said Hales. He talked into his own helmet phone, apprising the ship's Doctor of the situation. He motioned his men towards the flying saucer. One by one they entered the shining machine—Chemist, Physicist, Communications Expert, Engineer, Archaeologist, Rocket Pilot, Journalist and, last of all, Hales, the Astronomer-Captain. All, thought Hemmings, experts in their fields. All but me.

It was surprisingly roomy inside the saucer. There was a deep, comfortable settee, following the curvature of the shell. In the centre of the machine was a sphere of some transparent material, inside which sat the pilot. His long fingers—*his?* wondered Hemmings, *his*—or *its*—flickered over a bank of controls. With a barely perceptible motion the saucer rose, tilting slightly as it flew. Through big ports in its bottom the Earthmen could see the canal, the stunted, olive green vegetation, the red and orange and brown of the desert. Then there were streets and buildings and, at last, a wide square whose paved surface rose rapidly to meet them. The saucer grounded as silently as it had taken off, as silently as it had flown.

The door opened, the ramp slid out, grated slightly on the flagstones. Preceded by the Martians the Earthmen stepped out into the square, looked around them at the towering buildings, at the crowds of nude, apparently sexless natives who stared back at them. There were children among them, if size were any criterion, children and adolescents.

"Come," said the Martian who had first greeted them. "The Grand Council of Scientists awaits you."

It had been, decided Hemmings, one of the most boring afternoons of his journalistic career. The Martian scientists were old and stodgy, in spite of the hairlessness of their heads and faces contriving to convey the impression of long grey beards. It was as boring as Hales' chess games had been. It had been, in fact, remarkably like a chess game, expert pitted against expert, specialist against specialist, each avid for the other's knowledge but neither anxious to divulge too much of what he himself knew.

The Martians' acquaintanceship with Terran affairs was—patchy. Through their monitoring of Earthly broadcasts they had learned a considerable amount, but there were surprising gaps in their knowledge. There was, too, considerable distortion.

"We have," explained Hales, "a class of person whose function it is to gather and to disseminate news. Unluckily these journalists, as we call them, are apt to place sensation before accuracy . . ."

"We left it to *you*," said Hemmings, "to tell the world that Mars had no intelligent life."

The astronomer ignored him, was soon deep in a discussion concerning the trans-Plutonian planet which, it was divulged, had been visited once by a Martian ship.

This, thought Hemmings, is news, I suppose. He made a few dejected squiggles in his notebook.

Weldon, sitting next to Hemmings on the long settee, fidgeted.

He said: "I've had a basinful of this. Astronomy, Physics, Chemistry, Social Structure—all I want is a chance to pilot one of their flying saucers. Don't suppose you've got much out of it, have you?"

"No," said Hemmings.

"And this damned accent of theirs. It annoys me. Worse than Brooklyn." He contrived to squeak, in a falsetto whisper, "Me lettle pit hin lays penk iggs . . ."

Hemmings chuckled, then noticed that two of the Martians were looking curiously in his direction. He decided to change the subject, stared at a device on the opposite wall. "Wonder if that thing's a clock . . . That horizontal bar has moved a way down the scale since we've been here."

"Funny they should have a twenty-four day the same as us," said the Pilot. "Of course—theirs is logical. Twelve toes, twelve fingers . . ."



"Never mind the days," said Hemmings. "How do they spend their nights?"

The two men were suddenly aware of the silence. They looked up, saw that Hales was glaring at them, that the other Earth scientists were looking at them disapprovingly, that the Martians were regarding them with what may have been a flicker of sympathy.

"I would suggest," said the Captain icily, "that you gentlemen defer your private conference to some later date. Perhaps," and his voice dripped sarcasm, "our Mr. Hemmings has a question that *he* would like to ask our hosts."

Hemmings got to his feet. "Perhaps I have!" he shouted.

He strode to the most grave, the most senior, by his appearance, of the Martians. He stood with his notebook in his hand, his pencil ready. He was furious—with Hales, with himself, with these absurdly neuter otherworldlings.

"Tell me," he demanded, speaking loudly and clearly, "tell me—what do you people do about sex?"

He heard Hales gasp, sensed the embarrassment that he had caused the Martians. The one whom he had questioned flushed—a wave of rosiness under the clear, grey skin—flushed and looked away from the journalist, stared at the wall.

"You must think that we are very poor hosts," said the scientist at last, in his almost faultless, faintly accented English. His face, as he turned to Hemmings, seemed troubled.

"And you can tell that to your lettle, pit, penk hin . . ." whispered Weldon audibly.

"*Weldon!*" snapped Hales.

"You must think that we are very poor hosts," said the Martian again, glancing at the wall as he spoke.

"Well, what *do* you do about sex?"

"That," said the native, "is when we usually have tea."

—A. Bertram Chandler

*It will be a lonely existence for a spaceman enclosed in his tiny metal world hanging apparently motionless in the limitless of space—but the risks involved will not all be encountered in between planetfall.*

# OCCUPATIONAL HAZARD

By E. C. TUBB

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Illustrated by HUTCHINGS

He was a small man who had been drinking heavily and when I saw him he had just reached the quarrelsome stage. He sat at the bar, his legs dangling from the high stool, and his young face was flushed and angry looking. The bartender had said something, I didn't know what, and the little man wanted to take on more than he could handle.

"Take that back," he said thickly. "Take it back or I'll ram it down your throat."

"Forget it." The bartender swabbed the counter and looked at me.

"Scotch," I said. "Double."

He reached for a glass and tilted the squat, pinch-bottle, filling the glass with the smoky golden fluid. I sipped it, rolling the liquor around my tongue, then finished the drink at a single gulp.

I might have been drinking water.

"Fill it again." I rapped on the edge of the glass with my thumbnail, making it ring like a tiny bell. The little man glared at me, then rapped on the counter.



"I told you to take it back," he insisted as the bartender refilled my glass. He swayed a little and his taut face glistened with sweat. He was more drunk than he realised.

"What's the matter with him?" I jerked my head as I lifted the whisky and the bartender shrugged, busy with his eternal swabbing.

"I meet all kinds," he said. "Some I can understand, some I can't. He's one of the nutty ones."

"I heard that!" The little man leaned across the counter trying to grab the bartender's arm. He missed and snatched at a cut glass water bottle. I caught his arm before he could get into real trouble. He wasn't grateful.

His first swing was way off, his second a little better, and with the third he fell off the stool. I jumped down and jerked him to his feet, then hastily looked a question at the man behind the bar.

"In the corner." He gestured towards a dim alcove and watched with dull incurious eyes as I half-carried the little man towards the men's room. A woman giggled as we passed her table and a man stared with avid interest, not offering to help. I could feel a dozen pairs of eyes stabbing at us from the dimness of shadowed booths and by the time I reached the cloakroom I was dripping with sweat.

Inside he was very sick.

I leaned against the white tiled wall and watched him as he laved his face and rinsed his mouth, gargled and spitting back into the bowl. He fumbled for a towel and I passed him one, noticing his long, slender fingers and small, quick movements.

"Better now?"

"Yes." He stared at himself in the mirror. "Did I do any damage?"

"Not unless you count your suit, but you can always get that cleaned."

He glanced down and shrugged, crumbling the paper towel and slicking a comb through his short, damp hair. He looked tired and a muscle jumped erratically high on one cheek. His skin had a waxen look and his eyes glittered feverishly from a paper-white face.

He looked as though he hadn't slept for a week, eaten for a month, and had drunk himself sober too often, too soon.

He stared at me, undecided whether to offer me money, ignore me and go, or ask me to have a drink, and while he was trying to make up his mind I did it for him.

"I need a drink," I said and took his arm. "Join me?"

He nodded and we headed towards the bar.

His name was Matt and he had a chip on his shoulder bigger than a Douglas Fir. He didn't tell me in so many words, but I could sense it in a dozen different ways. By the way he swallowed his drinks, pouring the liquor down his throat as though he didn't like

the taste. By his restless shifting on the stool, the quick impatience of his voice, the slight trembling of his hands, a dozen things.

The girls must have noticed it too, or perhaps the bartender had warned them off, anyway none of them approached us even though several drank alone as they waited for their casual escorts.

I didn't try to make conversation. I had my own troubles and I was content to just sit and drink, but no matter how much I drank I couldn't drown my thoughts. Matt must have felt the same.

"Funny," he said, twirling his glass between his palms. "This stuff hits you different ways. Sometimes it lifts you to the Moon, and at others . . ."

"It takes you straight to hell." I drained my glass, then frowned at a tall thin man feeding coins into a juke box.

Noise crashed around us, the thin high bleat of clarinets and the discordant pulse of drums. The place began to get busy and the bartender wiped sweat from his bald head as he hurried along the counter serving drinks to beefy men and hard-faced women.

Suddenly I felt out of place and as irritable as hell.

"Let's get out of here," I said. Matt stared at me then jumped down from his stool.

"You know somewhere better?"

I nodded, pushing my way through the crowd pressing against the bar, feeling the muscles in arms and shoulders twitch as I forced my way between them.

Outside the night was clear and, after the heat of the tavern, bitterly cold. A beggar whined at me, thrusting out a dirty hand and shivering in his rags.

"Charity, Mister? Money for a bed?"

I snarled at him, and he recoiled as though I had struck him in the face. Seeing him cringe made me feel ashamed of myself, and I threw down some coins, grinning wryly at the expression on Matt's face.

"There but for the grace of God . . ." I explained, and he nodded, a strange tense look on his white face, then shrugged and fell into step beside me.

Together we walked into the night.

The air was crisp and clean, stinging my lungs a little and sending the blood racing through my brain. I sucked deeply at it, arching my ribs and savouring its unfamiliar, intangible natural flavour. The streets were fairly busy, it wasn't yet midnight, and we passed several couples as they walked arm in arm, oblivious to the world around them, lost in each other.

I watched them with a faint envy.

"Fool!" Matt stared after a young couple, the boy with his arm around her waist, trying to forget that his head only came to her shoulder. He looked at me, his eyes glittering against the waxen pallor of his face.

"He doesn't know! He doesn't know any of it!"

"Do you?"

For a moment I thought he was going to take a swing at me, and I tensed, poising on the balls of my feet. I felt a rush of anger, a desire to maim and hurt, and I snarled at him, my hands clenched into fists. He gulped, then passed his hand over his eyes and shook his head.

"No," he muttered. "Not you."

I didn't know what he meant.

"Sour grapes?" Deliberately I needled him, knowing that he had something on his mind and that he wouldn't feel better until he had got rid of it. He wouldn't be drawn.

"Forget it," he snapped. "If he wants to act crazy then let him. Why should I worry?"

After that we walked along in silence, staring at the passing couples and glancing at the brilliantly lit window displays. Above our heads the stars were almost drowned by the powerful street lights and a pale moon rested like a dim ghost low on the horizon. A faint wind blew and it was very cold.

I paused by a low doorway and looked at Matt.

"Coming in?"

He stared around him, frowning a little as though he recognised where he was, then shrugged and followed me into the tavern.

Inside it was very warm.

We spoke little and drank a lot, the liquor slipping down my throat as if it were water, unable to quench the fires within.

After a while I bought a bottle and we moved to a shadowed alcove, hidden from the main floor and lit by a single pink bulb. The light made Matt look almost healthy, but I could tell from the way he gulped his drinks that he was entering into that strange, half-drunk, half-sober condition where alcohol seems to have no effect, but when emotions hang poised on the razor's edge of murder.

Somehow I just didn't care.

"I like you," he said carefully. "You're a lot like me, small, and you can mind your own business."

I grunted something and reached for the bottle, not annoyed, not flattered, not anything.

"A lot like me," he repeated. "I bet that you had the same kind of ribbing at school that I had."

"Maybe."

"Shrimp they used to call me. Half-pint, shorty, sawn-off, you know the kind of thing. I bet that you know."

"I know," I said.

"Yeah." He stared down at his glass, then emptied it in one quick movement.

"Women," he said. He seemed determined to talk and I didn't try to stop him. "They're all the same. Bitches the lot of 'em!"

"Are they?"

"You know damn well they are!" He glared at me, the chip on his shoulder all ready to drop off, then he burped a little and tilted his glass. I refilled it, then my own, watching him carefully but making sure that he didn't see me do it.

"I'm a spacer," he said quietly. "One of those heroes who rocket between the stars."

He said it as though he had a bad taste in his mouth, sneeringly, contemptuous of his calling.

"I know."

"You seem to know a damn lot," he said irritably and reached for the empty bottle. He drained it, then flung it on the floor and glared at me. "How did you know?"

I shrugged, not answering, it wasn't worth it. Anyone not blind or dumb could tell what he was. His size, his quick gestures telling of a high reflex action, even his pallor, all told of his occupation. With weight the problem it was, a big man didn't have a chance to make the rockets; a small man needed less fuel to lift him into space, less air, water, food. The new era had arrived and Pygmies were in demand.

A shadow fell across the table and a girl stood just within the booth. She was just a woman, not old or young, pretty or plain, fat or thin. Just a girl trying to get along.

"Hello, boys," she said brightly. "Lonely?"

"No."

It didn't stop her, a slap in the mouth might have, but not just a word.

"Get you something?"

"Yes." I dropped money on the table. "A bottle. Scotch, and make sure that it's decent stuff."



She smiled and picked up the crumpled bills. Matt glared after her, his mouth an ugly line against the whiteness of his face.

"Women!"

"She's got to eat," I said mildly. "What's it to you how she does it?"

"Nothing."

He was getting angry, I could tell it from the way his eyes glittered and his hands twitched. He shifted on his seat, restless and fighting the thing he carried inside of him. He would either fight or tell, and I didn't give a damn which way it went.



The girl returned with the fresh bottle and an extra glass. She didn't give me any change and I didn't ask for any, it was that kind of a place.

"Mind if I join you?"

I shook my head, breaking the seal and pouring the glasses full of the golden liquor. Matt glowered at her, his young face hard and cold, then gulped his drink and sat staring down at his empty glass.

"You boys on a spree?" She tried to be bright and cheerful though all the time she must have been wondering whether or not we were worth it. I shrugged and Matt let his mouth split open into something that could have passed for a grin.

"Yeah," he said heavily. "A spree, a celebration."

"That's good." She smiled and wriggled a little closer to me. "What's the occasion?"

Matt shifted on the seat, sweat glistening on his pale face and his breath rasping between colourless lips. He swallowed, his eyes flickered from one to the other of us, and slowly his hand clenched the glass.

"My wife had a baby."

The girl laughed.

It was a mistake, of course, she must have been either very new or very dumb, or perhaps she just didn't stop to think.

I caught Matt as he lunged across the table, his hands like claws as they reached for her throat, his mouth slobbering curses.

I slapped him back—hard, then gripped the girl's arm until she winced.

"Apologise," I snapped. "Quick!"

She stared at me, her face white beneath its make-up, and stammered something which could have been an apology or could have been a curse, either way it didn't matter, he was too far gone to have heard it.

"You bitch!" He glared at her, his eyes red and bulging with rage. "You dirty stinking bitch!"

"You heard her," I snarled. "She didn't know, how could she? Now sit down before I smash your face in."

"She laughed at me! You heard her, she laughed at me! God!"

He crumpled like a paper bag, his head thudding on the wood of the table, his slim shoulders shaking with gulping sobs. I stared down at him, then at the startled face of the girl at my side.

"Get out of here, go over to the bar, come back when you've learned the score."

She blinked, half-annoyed, half-afraid.

"He's a spacer," I explained. "You should have guessed that, you must get a lot of them in here."

"I haven't been here long," she stammered. "If the Boss found out . . ." Now she looked really scared. I couldn't blame her, the spacers were free spenders when they had a chance and if her boss knew what she'd done she'd be out on her ear.

"Beat it," I snapped. "He'll be alright after a while."

She nodded, and after a last stare at the sobbing man, slipped from the alcove and went across to the bar. I saw her talking to the bartender, her face tense as she listened to his answers, then shrugged and reached for the bottle, looking down at the quivering figure of the spacer.

He was getting over it.

He was washing his hate and hurt away in a flood of emotion, breaking the tight chain and releasing his secret torment in a flood of tears. Some men are like that. Some men can stand just so much and then they break into hysterical release of emotion and inner stress, discharging the pain, and then being able to regain their normal calm. Some men that is, others . . .

He was lucky.

The girl came back and I pushed a drink in front of her. She looked a little abashed and I guessed the bartender had told her things she hadn't even thought about. Matt stirred, wiped his eyes, then reached for the bottle.

"Sorry," he said, but whether he spoke to the girl or me I didn't know. He poured and drank, poured and drank, and his glittering eyes dulled a little from the effect of the alcohol.

"Five years," he muttered. "Five long years—and my wife has a baby."

"Is that wrong?"

I flashed a glance at the girl, but she was wiser than I thought. Matt needed to talk about it, it festered within him and had to come out, and he could have had worse company. He looked at her, and this time he didn't seem about to spit.

"I'm a spacer," he explained. "I ride the rockets, have done for over five years now, and I've only been married three."

"I don't understand," she said, and I knew that she was lying. "Don't you want a baby?"

He gripped the glass again, his knuckles gleaming white through the skin, and the muscle high on his cheek jumped and twitched with a life of its own.

"Want a baby?" He laughed as a damned soul might laugh at the mention of Heaven. "God! I want a baby more than anything else in this whole damn universe!"

"Well then?" She frowned, and I had to admire her acting.

"I want a baby," he said thickly. "I'd do anything for a baby—if it were mine. But I'm a spacer. I've been sterile for the past five years!"

The tavern shook to the sudden thunder of pulsing venturis.

He cocked his head at the sound, the instinctive gesture of all who ride the ships of space, and stared at me as the noise died in quivering silence.

"Mars," I explained. "We're pretty near the spaceport here, that was the mail ship for the colony."

"Mars," he breathed. "My first run, five years ago when the whole thing seemed a wonderful adventure and no price was too high to pay."

"I know," I said, and reached for the bottle. He frowned at me, then looked at the girl.

"I knew about the radiation, of course. They couldn't keep a thing like that secret. The atomics sprayed the ship and everything in it, they couldn't use the heavy shielding of the passenger ships for cargo vessels, it cut the pay load too much, but it didn't make any difference—then."

He looked down at the table, not seeming to notice the glass I shoved beneath his nose.

"Before we had passed the Moon I was useless as a man," he said slowly. "Sterile. Barren, and fool that I was, I didn't care a bit."

"But you have a baby," she said, and I could have killed her for the way she said it.

"My *wife* has a baby," corrected Matt grimly. "Now do you understand?"

"I see." She blinked and touched his hand. "Couldn't there have been a mistake? Perhaps you aren't sterile after all?"

"No. No, there's no chance of that, I wish to God there was." He shrugged and toyed with his glass, already he had recovered sufficiently not to need the anodyne of the bottle.

"Can you understand? Can you imagine just what it's like out there, out in those lonely wastes between the planets? A man loses touch out there, he tends to lean too heavily on things too frail. A

woman's love, her loyalty, her faithfulness—needs to support the weight of dreams, and dreams can be heavy things.”

“I know,” I said. “I know just how it is.”

He ignored me.

“On Earth things are different,” he said, speaking more to himself than to anyone else. “A woman has a baby and her husband is glad. He doesn’t question whether or not it’s his, why should he? Some men know, of course, those in prisons, those with cheating wives who can’t keep their mouths shut, but the rest . . . ?”

He shrugged and stared into his glass, not seeing it, seeing instead the ruins of a once-happy marriage.

“I trusted my wife,” he whispered. “She knew that we couldn’t have children and she didn’t seem to mind, but the partings were too long, the days too lonely, and she was young and healthy and *normal*.”

I winced at the self-contempt in his voice.

“Every woman wants to have a baby,” said the girl, and I wondered at the tone of her voice. “Couldn’t you forgive her? Accept the child as your own? After all isn’t it much the same as adopting one, except that it will be half yours, not wholly a stranger.”

“Accept it?”

“Why not?”

He gulped at her, staring as if seeing her for the first time, and his eyes had lost their feverish glitter, becoming thoughtful and shining with something like hope.

“She said that she loved me,” he muttered. “She cried and begged me to stay, and I cursed her and walked out.”

He caught at the girl’s hand.

“Can a woman betray her husband and still be in love with him? Can she be trusted? Could I trust her?”

“No,” I said.

He glared at me, clinging to the girl’s hand, waiting for the answer he wanted to hear.

“Shut up, you! What do you know about it? How can you know?”

“I know,” I said tiredly.

“You say that but how can you?” He turned to the girl, looking into her overpainted face and trying to forget that I existed.

“Can I?”

“Yes,” she said gently. “I think that you can.”

He smiled then, smiled for the first time since we had met, and

then he was gone, disappearing into the night and the cold and the soft murmur of distant venturis.

I looked at the girl, then reached for the bottle.

We sat for a long while in silence, drinking, listening to the sounds from the spaceport, each busy with our own secret thoughts.

"Did you believe what you told him?"

"What?" She blinked, then remembered, then smiled. "Who knows? Some women maybe, but I told him what he wanted to hear, that was the important thing."

"But was it the best?" I insisted. "What of the future? What of the long months when they are apart, and doubt comes and he begins to feed the worms of worry? What then?"

She shrugged.

"Sufficient unto the day . . ." she quoted, and looked embarrassed at my stare.

"... is the evil thereof." I nodded, still not satisfied. "But does the evil of one day stay with that day? I know what it's like out there, out where the stars are like mocking eyes and a man shrinks and draws deep within himself. Space is too big, too vast, and a man has too much time for thinking. He will sit and brood, remember and imagine, and every time he sees the child he will feel hate and self-contempt."

"Perhaps not." She looked at me and shook her head. "He was right. How can you know? How can any man know what another feels?"

"I know," I said, and she looked at me with an odd expression in her eyes.

"I think you do," she whispered. "I think that perhaps you do."

I rose then and dropped money on the table before her, a lot of money, and she thanked me silently with her eyes. I pushed my way through the crowd on the main floor, jostling men in leather and plastic, cloth and coveralls, the personnel of the spaceport. I drove through them like a thing of wood, not feeling the bumps and jars, then let the doors slam behind me and stood breathing deep of the cold night air.

From the nearby spaceport a ship rose on a wash of flame, making a noise like a million sheets of paper being crumpled by some giant hand. It hovered for a moment, limned by the glaring lights of the field, then it was gone, and watching it, I felt my muscles tense in the old familiar way.

Space was clean. Space was cold and simple, hard and bright,

deep and vast. A man could lose himself out there. Locked in a tiny world bounded by the metal of the hull he could be what he imagined and none would deny him his dreams.

I longed for the feel of leather, the throb of controls beneath my hands, the thrust and weight and the poignant memory of free fall. I thought of the girl and smiled. I thought of Matt and pursed my lips to spit in disgust.

He didn't know me and I had never met him. Space was big and the ships scurried like swollen rats between the planets. He could be in space for another fifty years and we could still be strangers, just as we were now even though I had been in space longer than he had.

But he was wrong!

I did know how he felt. I knew what it was to have a ball of fire searing my stomach and a heart made of lead. I knew what it was to have everything blow up in my face like a paper bag, and to walk for hours with a mind all twisted with hurt and pain. I knew it too well.

My wife had just had a baby too!

—E. C. Tubb

*Earth's only outpost on Mars was a tiny observatory with a six-month tour of duty for the resident astronomer—alone. Interesting from the astronomer's viewpoint, but completely useless if there should be an emergency.*

# LAST MAN ON MARS

By W. P. COCKCROFT

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Evening came, bringing with it, as always, the nightly winds sweeping across Mars. The man shuddered as he heard the dry sand rattling against the building. The sound struck terror in his soul. He was reminded of the alien world which lay outside. It was a world bearing no comparison to the world within, the world which was his world of music, food and drink. Within his sanctuary he had everything save companionship. He would always have this abysmal loneliness, he felt, as long as he remained on his world. Reflecting back, as he often did, on the dreadful chance that had led to him being alone here. The memory of the night before that last day was suddenly with him . . .

It was his third day on Mars and by now he had been fully initiated into the duties he would share with Gilbert Foss. A farewell party was being held for those who were leaving on the ship next day. Two of them would not be returning to Mars; Martin, the man he himself had relieved, and Drake, a dour Scottish engineer. Drink flowed freely that evening, even Captain Bartlett letting himself go a bit. Trent reflected that it was possible those who were leaving on the ship drank too much because they knew it would be a long time before they got another drink; prices back on Earth were prohibitive whilst here on Mars it was tax-free. It could be that the powers on Earth realised that the exiles needed something to relieve the monotony of life on the red planet. That must be reason for the large stock of bottles. They knew man had his weaknesses and as long as one weakness could not be filled then the other one could.

Martin had been maudlin drunk very early in the evening. He had wobbled across the room to him and said: "It's all yours, Trent, old man. Every darned inch of the place. You can have it. You, and Gilbert here." He laughed mirthlessly, swirling the drink in his glass until it flooded over the edge and over his hand. "Yes, you and Gilbert. Can't for the life of me see what *he* sees in burying himself here. Must have something to be afraid of back on Earth. A woman, I suppose. It usually is the case when a man buries himself away from anywhere. Well—she's far enough away from him while he is here. I've had six months and that is plenty for me. I can go back now and gloat that I have lived on the red horror for six months and the memory of that should keep me going for the rest of my life."

"So that's why you came to Mars!" laughed Foss.

"Yes, that's why. Isn't it a good enough reason? Tell me, why did you come?"

Foss hesitated. "A bit difficult to say, offhand. I suppose there were a few reasons, really."

"Name 'em."

"Should I? If it pleases you, I will. For one thing life didn't seem to hold much promise back on Earth. You know, all the frontiers have been opened up, long before our time. Man has reached out to the stars now; we are exploring new worlds——"

"Fiddlesticks!" spluttered Martin. "You're talking like a modern edition of Cecil Rhodes. Empire builders! Hugh! Tell me, what the hell do you think you are doing? You—I know, I've done it myself—sit in that damned room upstairs and peer through that instrument, you make a few marks on a chart every day and that is your work. Exploring new worlds!"

"Maybe you are right but even in the observatory one feels to be in on it."

"In on it, he says. Look here, old man, we've been on Mars three years now. No, Trent, not us; I mean Man. It is three years since the first spaceship landed on Mars and what have we done in those three years? Stuck a few sheds up, built what we call a 'space-station'—what a name for it!—and an observatory. And what else? Not a darn thing! We've messed about and found nothing and done nothing. We've scratched one little corner and because all we have found are old ruined cities of some lost race we have decided that Mars is dead. Dead! But is it? If the Martians had come to Earth and landed in Africa by Zimbabwe or what we call the place where those ruins are would they have



judged us by those ruins? Would they have said: 'Ah, here used to be great civilisation; this civilisation has had its day and is gone.'"

Trent chuckled. "That seems to be getting a long way from the reason as to why Gilbert Foss is on Mars."

Martin waved his glass at him. "You're a new boy," he said, owlishly. "You shouldn't break in on a conversation, or a monologue, for that matter. You should just listen until you have done your six months. Then you can talk . . . Anyway, as far as we are concerned, I will admit that it is a dead and uninhabited world. Not for me the horror and loneliness of it. I have done what I swore to do, six months, and that's it. For that I can go back to my country and have my special privileges. Think of that. No getting dragged into military service. No, I am not frightened of military service; it's just that I don't fancy the discipline and some ignorant brass-hat telling me what to do. Some twenty-year-old second lieutenant telling me what's what; a mere boy who has managed to get a pip up because he went to the right school. Bah! There's another reason why I came to Mars. Just so I would escape being pushed around by being a privileged citizen. I can put a little tin badge on my coat now and know that I am immune from their silly little war games."

"I don't suppose Gilbert will ever tell you why he came to Mars," he went on, turning to Trent. "I've been with him six months and he never told me. And he volunteered for a further six months without telling me. I suppose when you come tearing away in another six months he will still be staying on. Yes, to every man his desire—that's supposed to be the first law of the united western democracies, isn't it? Bit odd, though, that the others have the same slogan, only in different words. 'To each according to his needs' or something. I cannot think that their needs are any greater or less than ours."

And so on. Gabble, gabble, gabble until the voice lost itself in intoxication and lack of an audience . . .

And then the next day. THE DAY. Even now the grim reality of it was still with him, time after time since then he had lived again the experience of that day which would never be eradicated from his memory.

Unsteadily he raised his glass to his lips and looked, in mind's eye, at these men for the last time. . . .

A subdued Martin had come along to the observatory to wish them farewell.

"I'll come to the station and see you off," Foss had said.

"Good of you, old man. Old Trent will guard the fort while you are away, eh? Well, so long, Trent; have a nice six months. I'll be watching out for you when you get back. That is, if I don't sign up for a spell on Venus. But that's not likely, as they can't use stargazers there. Maybe I can get a job with the Pioneers, though. I used to be pretty good at one time at throwing my weight about."

He smiled and was gone, Foss with him.

"See you in about half an hour," the latter cried over his shoulder.

Drake looked in, too. "Cheerio, Trent. I'll think of you, back there. We'd be sending you an invite to the wedding if it was any use. Good luck."

And the others, then finally Captain Bartlett. "All of them away? Ten minutes to take-off. Sorry you can't come down for it, not that there is much to see. Someone must stay here. Rules, you know."

Yes, someone must remain here. And he had remained. The minutes had slipped by; he had watched the long second-hand of the clock covering the last minute and listened for the take-off. Instead he had heard an explosion that seemed to rock the whole of Mars; sand had rattled like shot against the building to be followed by an embracing silence. He had at length emerged from the observatory to see what had happened. In the gigantic heap of wreckage he saw there and in the torn and shattered bodies of his erstwhile companions he could form no opinion of what had occurred. The only obvious thing was that the Martian Flyer had exploded, destroying all his companions and, it seemed, his hopes of seeing Earth again. He would never know what had happened, being a stargazer as they called him and not a technician. He knew nothing of the motive powers of spaceships. Foss, too, had been a stargazer.

Well, Gilbert Foss was gone now and there seemed little point in doing any stargazing himself, so that his hours in the observatory were fewer every day. More and more time was spent in the recreation room underneath where, with the music of long-dead composers to pass the time away, he loafed, occasionally, as the mood took him, drinking himself into a profound sleep. That way alone was he able to ensure himself a night of not-knowing; a night without tossing restlessly on his couch, thinking back to

his lost comrades. The torn bodies he had seen at the space-station he would never forget. There had been nothing he could do about them and he had left them for the sands of Mars to hide, knowing they would do just that, knowing that in time they hid everything and that, also in time, he and the observatory would also be covered by the red sands of Mars . . . If Earth did not send help soon. For the Diggers were out of order and without them he could not hope to battle against the sand. The lighting plant functioned as always because, fortunately, it was situated in the basement beneath the observatory whereas the Diggers had been controlled from the space station.

Perhaps he was lucky, he reflected; he had only to wait and sooner or later a ship from Earth would come and he would be replaced. Or would they let him return to Earth immediately? Perhaps not; perhaps there would be dreadful dragging days for him to wait while the enquiry took place. Whilst the wreckage was dug out bit by bit from the red sands for the experts to work on and he, as the nearest approach to a witness of the disaster, must be questioned and questioned . . . *God in heaven!* To stay any longer on Mars after this had happened! How long had he been here already? Six weeks, he told himself, uncertainly. He had intended keeping a register but he had not done so. Six weeks alone in this hell; six weeks watching the red sand pile up against the building and knowing that he could not fight it for ever. A Digger stood just outside the building, a useless hulk now half buried itself by the red sand it had always before relentlessly fought. Conquered at last.

Daily he dug himself out a path from the door so that he had a way into the open when the ship came, and each day when he looked out the sand had piled over it again and the work must be done all over . . . Forget? How could he forget anything? Here in this wilderness he knew it was impossible. Perhaps, he thought, when he was back on Earth he could forget. But here on Mars with the wreckage of the station so close to him it would be for ever impossible. Where else in this red hell could he go? This was the colony and this was Mars; east and west and south and north there was nothing else. Nothing but sand, sand that was the colour of blood, for mile upon mile, for kilometer upon kilometer. . . .

On Mars there was no salvation. Somewhere, it may be all around him, lay the buried cities of the dead civilisation of Mars. No one would ever know how many such cities there were; some of them lay buried for ever deep beneath the sands, others were

uncovered in that restless shifting, rising like long-dead ghosts from the past; ghosts without hope, yawning red ruins as old as Mars itself. Squat brown stone buildings with a suggestion of ancient Egypt in their design, built that way with a purpose, the purpose of combatting the sand, and built to endure. Endure they did and change they did not, save for the gradual erosion of the stone caused by the sand particles against them.

It would be millenia before the buildings collapsed. On the first day he had been on Mars before being introduced to his work he had been taken round and shown these cities. They had been photographed and gloated over by archeological expeditions many times; there had never been found any other trace of life on Mars. Presumably they had been swept away by time and everything else with them save their buildings. There had been some talk of a film company coming on location to make a film with one of the red cities for a setting; for some reason it had fallen through. Countless speculations there had been, all to no purpose. Everything was guesswork.

The mood of depression rose in him and he reached for the whisky, knowing there was little else to do; knowing there were at least two hundred bottles waiting for him in the stores down below, knowing that, knowing he was alone on a world, knowing Mars was a dead world, knowing that his comrades were one with the dust, he reached for the whisky. . . .

Three times he reached for the glass and then he reached to the machine. He started the tape, putting the volume at full. Beethoven's fifth symphony roared out over the world of Mars, vibrating the whole building, so that the very air seemed to shake with the music. It was his answer; his only answer. It was his challenge flung against the red sand that pattered endlessly across the roof and built up against the walls about him. It was his fight of madness against madness. Haggard, unshaven and unwashed, with clothes he had not removed for days, Trent fought the madness of Mars in the only way he knew how and with the only weapons at his disposal. For sometimes it seemed to him that Mars was a living thing; a devil of a planet whose only purpose was to drive him insane and destroy him as it had destroyed all others.

And always, when he drank, the past came back to drown out the memory of the present. Bitter nostalgia for days that were lost and gone for ever. He was no longer young, for he had served in one war. The authorities had found that older men took better to Mars; younger men found the monotony too much for them

and cracked up more readily. They sought, too soon, the return to a world which had the attractions of civilisation. He himself, he knew, would have been content here if only he had had someone with him. He had married shortly before that last war; that horribly inconclusive war which cast a shadow into the future: the shadow "to be continued." He had been called up and served six years and returned again to his home where he had no longer been wanted. His wife was no longer his wife, save in name, and he had taken steps to remedy that. Cutting the last link, he had looked for something different and on Mars he had thought he would find it. Knowing there would be no second time he had taken the lonely road, only to land himself in this unbearable situation. Now there was nothing to do but wait for the ship that could take him back, for Mars was for ever ruined for him now. But back to what? That he did not know; he only knew he would never be able to work here.

Carelessly he refilled the glass, spilling the liquid on the table. Someday, without doubt, there would be an end to it. Someday, if the ship did not come, the last bottle would be empty and he would be there without sleep and without rest and with only dear long dead Beethoven, Chopin, Liszt and the rest of them to keep him company. And they would not be enough to keep him from the red insanity. . . .

It was some considerable time later that the tape came to an end. By that time he lay in his chair, unconscious and unknowing. But the lights still burned and outside in the red hell of Mars the sand hissed against the walls and roof of the building.

It was morning when he awoke. He was, for once, glad to awaken to the nightmare of his existence, because the last hours of his sleep had been filled with nightmares of unmentionable horror, far more dreadful than anything in reality could be. He had seen the bodies of his companions devoured by the creatures of this world. They had been half-human, half-animal, who writhed their way through the sand to their gruesome feast. Thankful that the world was, after all, not so vile, he flung open the door and stared at the daily task which awaited him. Reaching for the shovel, he began his attack. Sweat poured off him as he worked. Occasionally he paused for a rest and each time he did so his eyes turned to the half-buried Digger and he talked to it because he felt it necessary to have something to talk to and even the Digger, being a product of man, was better than nothing. Up to a few weeks ago it had been alive and he had seen it indus-

trially doing what its name implied. Now it mocked him with its stillness. Sometimes he cursed it for not doing what it was built to do, and there were times when he would plead with it to help him fight the sand. And ever he would say, later, "I must be going crazy; talking to a machine." Then he was afraid, afraid that sometime he would not say these words to himself.

Two weeks later he had begun his drinking sessions earlier in the day. He knew that it was foolish; the time when he had no more must surely come the sooner, but he was also convinced that it was the only thing that was keeping him sane. He believed also, that the spaceship from Earth must soon arrive. The one from Mars had been so long overdue now that the people on Earth must know by now that something was wrong. And then he had a dim belief that another ship was supposed to pass the *Martian Flyer* on its return journey. Where was that one? He had lost all sense of time and knew that he could be well out in his reckoning. Sometimes it seemed to him that there had never been anything else but he alone on Mars. Only he and red sand, deadly enemies. For it must be remembered that he was drinking heavily and that truth and dreams were so mingling that he did not know one from the other. There were times when it seemed to him that Foss and the others were about him, speaking to him. It was an illusion which was always dispelled by the sight of Martin, for the realisation came that Martin should not be there. And, with that realisation, the key to the falsity of the dream was given him and it faded.

There were other times when he thought he saw a spaceship lying on the red sands and one time when he was convinced of the reality of this vision he ran miles across the sand, blundering, as he must, in the depth of it. As he ran the thing continually receded from him to vanish eventually from his sight, cruelly, at the very moment when he began to realise that it could not possibly be a spaceship, for spaceships don't slide along the sand into infinity.

Thus his days followed their strange routine; two or three hours each morning his onslaught against the enemy, digging out his path; a path which began at the door and ended nowhere for the simple reason that there was nowhere for it to end. It was done because he felt it necessary to have an outlet when the spaceship did arrive. Each morning his onslaught, each evening the onslaught of the enemy which piled it ever higher against the walls. The wrecked spaceship station no longer resembled a station. It had become a mound in the sand. A grave. A fitting tomb to the hopes of Man on Mars, he himself put it, laughingly as he did so,

for what was one lost spaceship to a world like Earth with all its teeming millions? More and more spaceships were being built, more and more expeditions would cross the void and more and more stations would be erected.

And so the days came and went, telescoping themselves together into the past. It was during one of his periods of drunken sleep when the spaceship did arrive, so that he knew nothing of it until he went out to dig his usual path in the morning. Indeed, he had already worked for some time before he observed it, little more than a mile away from where he was. He stood, bewildered and incredulous, regarding it doubtfully before throwing the shovel aside.

He was afraid, at first, that it was another hallucination. And then he began blundering forward through the sand towards it, falling many times, staggering always; yet always forcing his way forwards towards the ship, knowing, at last, that his destiny lay before him. He could see that the ship had made a crash landing but he told himself that was nothing unusual.

Reaching the ship he pounded on the door and it remained obdurate in his face. For ten minutes he hammered and shouted and the ship ignored him utterly. Presently he struggled back to the observatory again, found some tools by which he hoped to be able to force his way into the ship, and for a third time made the journey. To find that, in the meantime, the doors had been opened. He circled the ship circumspectly, afraid of he knew not what. For no one had emerged. At length curiosity conquered his caution and he warily entered the ship. The first men he saw did not need more than one glance for him to assure himself they were dead. Hardly pausing, he rushed into the control chamber. And there he found the man who still lived; the man who had opened the doors for him. Trent had little knowledge of first-aid but realised that the man had some internal injuries and he could not take him to the observatory. He hunted until he found the first-aid kit on the ship and did what he could for the unfortunate man. Presently the man opened his eyes and stared at him.

"You a doctor?" he asked.

Trent shook his head and the man smiled, feebly. "Don't suppose it makes any difference," he said. "I'm a goner, in any case. Mean to tell me you haven't got a doctor here?"

"Did have. Dead, like them all."

It seemed the flame of life was flickering low in the man. His eyes closed.

"What . . . ?"

"What happened? Don't ask me. I was in the observatory and everyone else was at the spaceship station. Ship exploded; that's all I know. Everyone of them was killed. I'm the last." He laughed suddenly, sharply and hysterically. "Say, what do you think of that? I'm the last man on Mars. The last hope! What happened to you? Something go wrong with your ship?"

The other man was silent for so long that Trent thought he had lost consciousness again. He shook him, violently. "What happened? to you?"

He opened his eyes momentarily and closed them again. "Sorry, pal. Can't help you. See, the war started up again. Everything in ruins. London, Paris, Washington, Moscow—all gone. The world is a shambles. All because of a few bloody idiots on both sides. We had our war-makers as well as the others; don't doubt that. People who stood to make fortunes out of war; there's the weak point of the western democracies. Or was their weak point; doesn't matter now. All destroyed. Priority targets were the spaceship sheds. The factories where they were built, and the station from where they left Earth.

"And some of us at the York plain testing grounds realised that Earth as we knew it was finished and we decided to get out of it and come to you on Mars. It seemed to us that by this time you'd have built up the base of a civilisation on Mars and we thought we could throw our lot in with you. This spaceship seemed to be one of the few undamaged ones and we thought we could make it Mars. We did too, only we bungled the landing . . . So . . . don't go back to Earth, boy. Stay here where you are safe from the madness. . . ."

His voice dwindled to a whisper and was gone. Trent saw the life leave him and let him fall back on the floor. With a wail of dismay he flung himself out of the spaceship. Had there been anyone to see he would have made a ridiculous figure as he rushed back through the sand, falling, picking himself up, falling again, but ever struggling on until at last he was through the door and back in his sanctuary and had slammed the door on the world of Mars and on his hopes and on everything. And once again on the evening of Mars came the sound of music.

And the red sands of Mars built up against the building, slowly burying the sanctuary of the last man on Mars. . . .

—W. P. Cockcroft



*At first it was rather a fascinating dream but it gradually developed into a recurring nightmare which got rougher with each sequence. Somebody needed a psychiatrist—or a doctor.*

# FAMILY SECRET

By ARTHUR COSTER

---

Elvan Semper, of the Air Force Flying Saucer Investigation, floated as much as walked along a passage which he had seen before, but never so clearly as now. The light was greenish, the floor spongy, the air damp.

At the other end, a door stood slightly ajar, and brighter light sliced through the crack. Elvan swam towards it. He could hear voices beyond.

Vaguely, he wished Eileen were with him. It was so much fun to do things with Eileen. The most commonplace outing became an adventure when she was along; and this was no commonplace outing.

He put his eye to the crack of the doorway. Two figures were standing in front of a wall chart. They were brightly uniformed. "Officers," Elvan thought, wondering if they outranked him.

They were studying the chart and speaking in low tones. Elvan could see that it was map of North America, though an unfamiliar projection. All over it were glowing spots, little fireflies of light. The officers were pointing at the spots and discussing them. Now and then one officer would take up what looked like a fly-swatter and hold it in front of his face while talking.

Elvan noticed that the spots were moving, just perceptibly. He leaned into the room for a better look. The door made a squishing sound. The two officers turned and stared at Elvan. He stared back at them.

Both of them had bumps over their eyes, as though they had fallen downstairs far too many times. The one with the fly-swatter spoke sharply to Elvan.

"Stugish, Omarpeff! Yesslerun stugish:"

Elvan drew back into the passage, closing the door between himself and the officers. He began to swim back the way he had come.

The door was jerked open behind him, and his arms were seized roughly. He was hauled along the tunnel.

He thought of Eileen's probable condition and was glad after all that she was not with him.

The officers took Elvan into a tiny room and pushed him into a shelf or bunk. They strapped him down. One officer left the room, and the other hung over Elvan, talking angrily.

"Baylgen, Omarpeff! Kovopter tinsel!" said the officer. Then he launched into a dissertation which had the unmistakable ring of a lecture on rules, regulations, oaths, duties, and so on.

The other officer returned with some sort of box. Elvan did not like the look of it. The officers spoke together briefly. Then the one with the box turned and held it over Elvan's head. Inside, it was totally black. Nothing could be seen. The officer said, "Stugish, Omarpeff!" and lowered the box.

Elvan screamed. A bright light blinded him. Something seized him. He started to fight. A voice said, "Darling! Darling! It's me!"

He stopped fighting. Eileen's large brown eyes were staring into his own. He looked around the room quickly. There was no one to be seen. Everything was just as it should be. He took a deep breath.

"I had a dream," he said.

"No kidding!" Eileen patted his face. "I thought the goblins had got you for certain this time."

"So did I!" He shuddered. The memory of the box was vivid. "That is the most horrible thing I ever felt!"

"What is?"

"When they put the black box over my head."

"*What* black box?"

"In the saucer."

"Oh, darling!"

"Well, it was only a dream. Anything can happen in a dream. Even a black box." He yawned.

Eileen rubbed his back. "All right now?"

He nodded, through another yawn, and lay down. Eileen turned out the light and pulled up the covers. "That's better," she said, after a moment.

"Yeah. That's a *lot* better."

In the distance, a midnight jet crossed the sky with a swoosh.

"Elvan."

"Mm-hmm?"

"Maybe you ought to get some other assignment."

"Oh, foo! It's got nothing to do with the assignment. It's something I ate."

"Every night?" She rose on her elbow. "Elvan, my cooking isn't *that* bad! You used to sleep like a baby. Now, it's nothing but nightmares. I'm worried about you. Would it be so hard to get another job?"

He patted her affectionately. "I can just see that! To the Commanding General: Semper requests transfer. Reason: bad dreams." He snorted. "They'd send me straight over to the witch doctor!"

"But you'd get another assignment."

"Eileen, I don't *want* another assignment. And anyway, the only other assignment I'd get would be Ward Eight. They'd tell me my libido was on backwards, and you'd have to come down and show them it wasn't."

"Elvan, I'm being serious! You're getting circles under your eyes. And it's not doing me any good either. Mumbling in your sleep. Tossing and turning. Getting up to have a cigarette. You never used to do those things. Just since you were assigned to . . ."

"Eileen, that's silly! Let's go to sleep."

The bed turned on its side. Elvan tried to reach for Eileen, but his arm would not move. He opened his eyes.

The black box had been knocked off his face and was falling in a slow arc across the room. "At least, this time I know it's a dream," he thought.

He tested his straps. They were too strong to break. Then he noticed that he could reach the buckles if he tried.

He had a feeling that Eileen was close to him. He turned his head. The feeling faded.

It took a moment to master the buckles. Then he rose without effort from the shelf. There was just enough sensation of downness to orient him in the room.

He opened the door a crack and peered out into the dim passage. It was empty. He went out silently and stood looking up and down, undecided.

"Why waste all this time?" he thought. "It's *my* dream!" He wished himself again in the room with the two officers. He willed the dream to proceed to that point. Nothing happened. He remained right where he was.

He tried again. The floor lurched under him, then dropped away, leaving him in the air for a second.

A light appeared at the other end of the passage. Someone was opening the door. Elvan ducked back into the cubical and waited. Someone shouted. In a moment, the two officers entered.

Elvan was ready to fight, but when one of the officers drew out what was obviously a weapon and pointed it at him, he changed his mind.

"Omarpeff, gonjerress cake farsempa!" The officer pointed to the shelf.

Elvan shrugged his shoulders and resumed his position on the shelf. The officer continued to point the weapon at him, while the other secured the straps and replaced the black box.

A sick feeling swept over Elvan, a feeling of horror and degradation. "I am worthless," he thought. "I am miserable and helpless. I am without hope. I am insubordinate. I am stugish. I hate myself. I must despise, punish and torture myself. I must renounce all pleasure, reward and happiness, and live in misery, sickness and defilement, until I am willing and eager to obey my superiors, who know what is best for me . . ."

Elvan put out his hand slowly. It touched something smooth and warm. Something infinitely pleasant and comforting. He trembled with gratitude.

Eileen moaned and turned against him, passing a proprietary hand over his body. She tensed and woke. "Darling, you're sick!"

"I'm all right," he croaked.

"But you're all in a sweat!"

"I . . ."

"You've been *dreaming* again!" She sat up. "Honestly, Elvan! This has got to stop! I don't know what you're finding out in this damn investigation, but it can't go on like this!"

Elvan threw off the covers and got up. He staggered to the open window and stood looking out into the cool night.

"Elvan, are you out of your mind? That's the best way to catch pneumonia I ever saw!" She clambered across the bed and took his hand. "Come back, dear!"

He let her pull him back to the bed, but he did not lie down. She stood close against him. "Darling, it scares me!"

He circled her slim waist. "Nobody ever got killed in a dream," he said.

"Kiss me, Elvan!"

Their bodies folded into each other in a moment of sweetness. Then, Eileen faded away in his arms. The room rocked, and he lost his balance. He fell slowly, pinning Eileen's struggling shadow to the bed.

"Mandeptio ghemaper stugish!"

He was sitting in a chair of some kind, in the chart room. The two officers were bending over him.

"*Stugish!*" one of them shouted.

There was a band around Elvan's head which was damnably tight. It held him upright in the chair.

"Eddere font," the other officer said.

The first looked at Elvan closely and spoke in a different tone.

"Tubaregash luffli, Omarpeff?"

"Nuts!" said Elvan.

The officers looked at each other in amazement. They went to a corner, opened a drawer, and took out a slim volume. They came back and leafed through the pages, talking together.

Elvan caught a glimpse of the writing in the book, and his eyes widened. It was strange beyond strangeness, and it was green. The pages were of a beautiful lucent material.

The officers found what they were looking for. One of them took the book, cleared his throat, and spoke self-consciously to Elvan.

"Kto vui?" he said. "Chto khoteetye?"

"I don't speak Russian," said Elvan, pleased at his ability to recognise the language even in a dream.

The officers had a short conference, turning the pages. Then, the linguist tried again.

"Hoo ar yoo? Wut doo yoo wunt?"

"My name is Semper," Elvan said. "And all I want is a good night's sleep without you around."

The officers drew back from him, regarding him with great interest. Elvan willed them to turn into circus clowns. They remained as they were, scrutinising him.

The leader of the two picked up a fly-swatter from the table and spoke through it. Somewhere in the room, a voice answered. The officer spoke again. The voice answered briefly. The officer put down the fly-swatter.

They unfastened the band from Elvan's head and took him back to the cubical. He was too weak to resist.

The black box came down.

"I am unworthy. I am insubordinate. I am loathsome. I have not lived up to my . . ."

A telephone rang. Someone said hello. It was Eileen. Dear little Eileen!

"What? No, I'm fine. It's Elvan. He passed out a little while ago!"

"Eileen!"

"No, he's never passed out before, but he's been having the most horrible dreams and nightmares, every night . . ."

*"Eileen!"*

"Just a minute, Doctor. I think he's calling me."

She came running in. "Elvan?"

"Back again!" He tried to sound cheerful.

"I've got Dr. Wilson on the phone."

"I don't need a doctor. I need a disintegrator pistol."

"Shall I ask him to come over?"

"No. If there's anything wrong with me, we should call the base. If there isn't, we shouldn't bother Wilson in the middle of the night."

She sighed and went back to the phone. Presently, she came and stood by the bed. Her hair was wild and soft, her robe twisted, her face perplexed. Elvan smiled at her.

"Do you want me to call the orderlies at the base?"

"No. I'm all right."

"You aren't either!" She sank down on the bed and put her hand on his forehead. "You have a temperature."

"No, I don't." He took her hand.

"Well, that's the one thing we don't have to guess at." She got up and went into the bathroom. Elvan lay staring at the ceiling.

"Turn on your side."

"What?"

"Turn on your side!"

"Listen, I'm not a baby!"

"If you think I want you passing out again and biting right through this thermometer, you're crazy. Now, over!"

He turned reluctantly.

"Ow!"

"It doesn't hurt."

Outside, an early bird chirped tentatively.

"You know, honey, I'd rather have you take my temperature than get a decoration from the C.G."

"Shut up!"

Another bird joined the first one for a moment. Then both of them thought better of it and went back to sleep.

"There! Ninety-nine!"

"Pretty bad temperature, all right!"

Eileen turned out the light. The sky was just beginning to show dawning. She plumped down into the bed and lay apart from Elvan.

"... oath of duty. My friends will forsake me, my relatives will betray me, my comrades will shun me. Women will reject me. I am vile and debased. I..."

The box came off, and Elvan found that he was sitting up again, in the chart room. A third individual had joined the two officers. He wore a brilliant orange uniform. He approached Elvan.

Elvan drew back slightly and discovered that the band was again tight around his head. The orange one reached behind Elvan, and the band grew tighter. Elvan winced.

"Identify yourself!" the orange one commanded. He had a whining voice and a mean manner.

Elvan's impulse was to say something rude, but military training and a growing doubt restrained him. He gave his name, rank and serial number. The orange one spoke to one of the others, who wrote something down.

"Now, Captain Semper," said the orange one, "just what do you expect to gain by spying on us?"

"Spying on you!" Elvan's surprise was too quick to be held in.

The voice of the orange one rose. "Do you think we have no ways of protecting ourselves against intrusion? Do you imagine we are totally ignorant?" He put his face close to Elvan's. "What were you sent to find out?"

"Why should I do all the work in this dream?" Elvan sneered. "Answer your own questions!"

The face of the orange one suddenly matched his uniform. He reached behind Elvan.

Elvan stiffened. He saw before him the twelve-year-old who had sat on him when he was only eight and had squashed a dozen snails in his face. He heard his own pleas to be let up. He heard his own degrading and honourless promises to his tormenter, offered as a

futile ransom. He heard the shells crush and felt the juice running through his clenched teeth.

The orange one reappeared. Elvan found that he could breathe again.

"Now," said the orange one, "I will give you a chance to answer my question without rudeness. Why have you been spying on us? What were you sent to find out?"

Somewhere, faintly, Elvan heard the familiar bell of the alarm clock. "Thank God!" he thought. "Eileen will wake me."

He waited for this to happen, but it did not. The orange one reached behind again, instead, and Elvan answered quickly, "I have not been spying on you or on anybody."

The orange one smiled in mock tolerance. "Twice, against orders, Omarpeff, who has the sickness, leaves his shelf. Once he comes to the chart room, where he does not answer questions properly. Again, when he is questioned, he speaks English. Again, he says that his name is Semper, that he is a Captain, and that he has such-and-such a serial number." The orange one's lips curled and he snarled in Elvan's face. "What do you take me for? An idiot?" He reached for the headband.

"I am not spying on you," Elvan stuttered. "I didn't want to come here."

"Captain Semper," the orange one confided in a friendly fashion, "that headband can be turned on so strongly that you will find your existence utterly intolerable and you will beg me to break your arms and legs instead, but I will not be able to hear you begging, and so I will not know how earnestly you desire to co-operate with me. If you want to avoid such discomfort, you will have to answer my questions immediately and truthfully, and *without* communicating with your headquarters first!"

"I'm *not* communicating with my headquarters!" Elvan said in disgust, and saw that it was the wrong thing to say.

"I don't like insolent lies!" the orange one screamed. He reached behind Elvan's head, and Elvan understood immediately what he had meant about the headband.

"... wanted me to call the orderlies at the base, but they'd come and get him in one of those awful little ambulances, and I wouldn't see him for days..." Sounds of crying.

"We'll have to call them if he doesn't wake. Mrs. Semper, but his respiration and pulse are better now."

"Are they?" Sounds of snuffling.



"I'll call you from the hospital in a couple of hours."

"You've been wonderful, to come over like this, Doctor! I know I've been a baby about it, but . . ."

"The state of your emotions is just as important to me as the state of your husband, my dear . . ."

". . . and an outcast for the rest of my short life, if I do not quickly learn to . . ."

Scraping sounds. Sounds of an old and authoritative throat being cleared.

"Captain Semper, open your eyes."

Elvan obeyed. The face before him was lined. The uniform was purple.

"Who am I?" said the purple one.

"I don't know," Elvan answered dully.

"Who are you?"

Elvan gave his name, rank and serial number.

"Are you here under orders?"

Elvan looked at the purple uniform, and anger got the better of him. "No, I'm not here under orders!" he grated. "We don't get orders on what to dream in our organisation!"

The interrogator ignored Elvan's tone. "What are your regular duties, Captain?"

"I police up the post and walk the general's cat!"

Someone else spoke in the room, and the expression on the purple one's face became sterner. "Captain, everything you have told me thus far has been true except that last statement. Though I did not approve of the rash use of force by my subordinate—you remember the officer in the orange uniform—" Elvan nodded bitterly. "Still, I am not going to be lied to. If you will please reconsider my question. What are your regular duties?"

"What if I won't tell you?" said Elvan, feeling melodramatic but, somehow, right.

The interrogator said something to his assistant, and Elvan's head was quickly clamped by the familiar band. He felt nauseated. Terror crawled wormily inside his arms and legs. At the same time, he realised that he could not die, but could only be driven back into the world of waking. He wondered if it would not be better to stay in the dream—if it was a dream—forever.

He watched the interrogator anxiously. The interrogator watched him. The assistant made some adjustments.

The interrogator seemed to change his mind. He picked up a

fly-swatter and spoke into it for a long time, pausing to receive occasional brief replies from an unplaceable metallic voice. He put down the fly-swatter.

"You are lucky, Captain," he said. "If you will answer a few questions truthfully, we may be able to let you go."

Elvan made a great effort to wake up, but only succeeded in making himself dizzy.

"Why did you come here?" said the purple one.

"I don't know!" Elvan sighed. He wondered what Eileen was doing. Poor little Eileen!

He noticed that the interrogator was nodding at his assistant, and his stomach contracted. But then he saw that the interrogator looked pleased.

"How did you come here?"

"I don't know." Maybe he should request a change of assignment. It wasn't fair to Eileen to upset her this way. If she were actually pregnant, it was dangerous. Passing out with her in his arms, thrashing around in the bed. Even waking her suddenly in the middle of the night with his yells and groans. It had to stop. She was right.

"Who is Omarpeff?"

"I don't know, damn it!" Elvan snapped. "I don't know anything about any of this!"

The purple one looked quickly at his assistant, who said something. The purple one nodded and smiled. Then he shook his head.

"This is unusual, Captain. And fortunate for all of us!"

He gave some instructions. Elvan felt something happening in his head, a sort of tickling. It was not unpleasant. He began to relax. A glow spread from his head into his chest and stomach, arms and legs. A sickish-sweet sensation pervaded him.

The purple one began to intone.

"There is no pleasure in entering the body of Omarpeff, but only pain. There is no pain in staying in my own body, but only pleasure. Captain Semper's body is good. I must stay in it always. I must not spy on anyone. These things that I have seen are only my imagination and my dreams. If I tell anyone about them, I will be considered insane and I will be locked up. I will not think about them again. I will sleep without dreaming. I will sleep, sleep, sleep . . ."

Elvan sat up and looked at the clock. *Eight!*

"Eileen!"

There was a gasp in the other room, and his wife appeared in the doorway. "Elvan!"

"You let me oversleep, Eileen! It's eight o'clock!" He began to get out of bed grumpily.

"Elvan, *honestly!* After the night I've had with you! And Dr. Wilson's been here and . . ."

"Dr. Wilson! What was he doing here?" He stared at her. A crafty look spread over his face. "Eileen!" He crept toward her. "Are you keeping something from me?"

She shrank back from him but he caught her hand, and grinned at her. "Darling!" he said, "it's all right! It's all right!" He drew her to him with infinite respect and gentleness. She came fearfully but easily, with big eyes looking up at him.

He spoke in her ear.

"We'll need a bigger place, and a better place. I'll put in for a transfer. Something with . . ."

"You'll what!"

"Sure! Something with more pay. Maybe something in a warmer climate. We'll see . . ." He let her go and rubbed his hands together.

She stood looking at him doubtfully. "Elvan," she said, "I'm not sure that . . ."

"Don't worry about a thing, my sweet!"

The phone rang. He picked it up.

"Well, hello!" said Dr. Wilson. "How's the patient?"

Elvan winked at Eileen. "She's just fine, Doctor. Just fine! It's wonderful!"

Dr. Wilson had a brief fit of coughing and clearing his throat. "Could I speak to Mrs. Semper?" he said.

"Right here, Doctor!"

Eileen sprang to the phone.

"Be careful!" Elvan told her. "You can't go jumping around like that!"

He went in to dress. "Women are funny," he thought.

He turned to the mirror over the washstand. "Let's see. John, William, Ronny, George, Henry, Omarpeff—"

He stopped and stared at his face in the mirror. "What was I saying?" he thought. Eileen was still talking in the other room.

He shrugged and began to wash his face. "Wouldn't be a bad idea to drop in on the doctor myself. Get some free vitamins or something. Been feeling kind of stugish . . ."

—Arthur Coster



*It was another world in another space-time continuum, but basically the problem was just as difficult to define—how to combat the mental changes a differing environment will almost certainly make.*

# H A V E N

By PETER HAWKINS

---

Illustrated by HUTCHINGS

Commander Dennis Monckton raised his head after staring for a long time at the viscreen and looked for'ard through the control room window. Ahead of the escapeboat, apparently the size of the palm of his hand, and hanging against star-dotted space, shone a blue-green planet as like Earth as any he'd seen. Monckton knew his problem; had known for three weeks that sooner or later it would arise, but his foreknowledge had given him no means of solving it.

Below him was a world that preliminary investigation had shown to be the nearest thing to a second Earth yet discovered, and on which was plentiful air, water and, more than likely, animals that could be captured and killed. He could land on that world, but whether he and his men would ever leave it was another matter. Natural conditions wouldn't be the enemy here; the enemy would be within each man, the enemy which had made individuals, since recorded history began, turn their backs on their own race and go native.

Monckton himself longed to land, to walk on grass again, to breathe air which hadn't been breathed and purified a thousand times, to eat fruit he himself could pick from a tree instead of emptying from a can, to eat fresh meat which, unlike the reconstituted dried material he existed on since the beginning of the *Attila's* fateful cruise, would not tie the stomach in knots.

There were, besides himself, three survivors from the *Attila* and Monckton knew, if there were humanoids on the planet, two of those survivors would have deserted before the time came for departure. Those two trained men, a mere *two* of all the millions fighting the Gornevians in their water-filled spaceships, but they were *trained*; their preparation for fighting had cost money and precious time, the materials of which Earth possessed so little. Earth needed their knowledge, even if they were only little better than shells of men.

Alternatively Monckton could refuse to land and find himself target for their revenge. Those two men had no more stomach for war than he had, but Monckton possessed a high responsibility index towards his fellow humans; he knew it was that quality, more than anything else, which had brought him from being a promising barrister to the rank of Commander in the Earth Empire Space Navy. Anyway, he wanted to land and he was Commander . . .

He clasped his hands on the overhanging metal edges of the navigation table, drawing some comfort from the immovability his fingers encountered. He looked away from the world over his shoulder, where the still hardly tarnished loops and lines of his Commander's insignia glistened in the cold light of the fluorescents, into the stone-coloured eyes of Cox, the space-tanned Master at Arms, standing in the at-ease position, hands clasped behind his back.

Monckton knew what Cox was thinking; envied the time-serving spaceman's knowledge of a thousand worlds and man's reaction to them, while irrationally disliking him for being a professional soldier. Cox knew the dangers of an Earth-type world and wouldn't like the instructions Monckton was going to give, but he'd obey them and carry them out far more efficiently than either of the other survivors, conscripts like Monckton himself, of Monckton's first and only command. Monckton just hoped there would be no encounter with the inhabitants, if humanoid, during touchdown.

"Cox."

"Sir?" The master at arms sprang to attention.

"Land ship."

"Aye aye, sir."

Monckton shifted his gaze uneasily to Balmain, the one-armed wireless operator, remembering how Dyce, the medical orderly who had performed the amputation of the crushed and shattered remnants of flesh, had taken his own life with one of his drugs when

he'd realised the unlikelihood of the escapeboat finding an inhabitable world, let alone an Earth Empire planet. There was hope in Sparks' features; he wanted Monckton to land because he'd decided he couldn't live with only one arm in the world back home. He'd confided his fears in Monckton and broken down in tears as he'd finished, somehow making Monckton feel that he was more than indirectly responsible for Balmain's misfortune of war. Balmain would certainly desert—if he discovered he had the guts to do it.

Then there was the remaining survivor, Slaney, the ship's port-casanova, a sleek, dark, hyperspace mathematician with a pencil-line moustache. He'd desert within an hour of touchdown because his psychological tests had failed to detect he would suffer awful nausea looking out into the vast emptiness of space, so the man couldn't help disliking Naval service. He had refused, quite within his rights, to have the difficulty psych'd out of his mind because he thought it might interfere with his civilian activities. On his homeworld beneath Alpha Centauri he was a champion swimmer and he knew that, on the blue-green world below, there was water and a chance for him to continue, although on a different world, his chosen career . . . Yes, like Sparks but for different reasons, Slaney wanted to vanish, to get out of the tin can which imprisoned him—just as Monckton wanted to leave it, but not permanently.

The ship, under Cox's guiding hand, began to move forward with increasing momentum, forcing Monckton to grip the table more tightly to counter the backward push of acceleration. A sudden jerk brought back memory of the big blow-up—how an almost spent shot from the enemy had hit the *Attila* amidships, how it had detonated a dozen stored high-explosive projectiles, blasting a terrific hole in the vessel's side just below the control room and blowing all fire control and communications to human pulp and metal junk, how he'd spent hours in his spacesuit clutching the small plastic bag containing his personal belongings, tossed, it seemed for eternity, in a black vortex shot with red and purple lights as the ship, without a hand controlling her hyperspace drive, had slowly torn herself to pieces, distributing her complement at random into the multitude of dimensions which make up hyperspace. Dyce, the orderly who had committed suicide, had picked him up just before the final explosion whirled them into infinity.

Slaney was whispering to Balmain, they ceased talking immediately Monckton glanced their way, the very suddenness of their action fixing the certainty in Monckton's mind that they were

acting together. Slaney slipped out of the control-room, presumably to tend the engines. Monckton thought of following him and decided against it because Slaney wouldn't attempt to sabotage the propulsion unit until the escapeboat was landed. Most likely he wouldn't even then if the world were uninhabitable by Earthmen.

Monckton stiffened, asking himself if *he* really wanted to return to Earth; quickly he searched for comparisons with his fellow survivors. Cox's home was space; he'd want to be out among the stars again as soon as possible. The master at arms had been born. Monckton recalled from his memory of the ship's records, in a Naval hospital and his mother had died shortly after his birth. His father had been killed in action before he had heard of the birth of his son and the Navy had reared Cox, educating him and welding the traditions of the Service on to him. The triple row of medal ribbons on Cox's little-used dress-uniform testified how well the Navy had succeeded.

Monckton slowly released a sigh; he could find no points of comparison. Cox's life was space; Balmain considered his was wrecked; having no family connections anywhere, Slaney wouldn't give a damn where he deserted as long as he could re-start his career as a swimmer. Monckton's own life had been uneventful; at thirty-five he had begun to acquire a reputation as a barrister. His world, he knew, consisted of his small circle of friends, his flat in Putney, his practice and the gyrojet in which he flitted off to Spain every weekend. A reminiscent smile crossed his lips; the bull-ring at Valladolid seemed infinitely nearer than the tree-lined stretch of river along which Oxford and Cambridge had rowed their annual battle for over three centuries.

When the Navy had claimed him Monckton had been quite pleased to leave his relatively limited sphere of action, but as time had passed he felt himself longing for the securer life he had once known. With a mild shock he realised he was landing because he felt like being out of space for a while; because, somehow, he already considered Earthly things as things of the past.

"In atmosphere, sir," reported Cox.

Monckton grunted acknowledgment; suddenly he became aware of bumpiness in the ship's flight, sure indication the vessel was ploughing through air. Cox slowed down the ship, bringing her low over a wide expanse of open, rolling countryside, dotted with trees and scrub. As the ship coasted down Monckton saw several brown specks of animals darting for cover. With a bit of luck he and the other survivors would eat fresh meat tonight. Ahead a thin



streak of silver-blue, a river, wended its way placidly through the countryside.

"Hell!" snapped Cox suddenly. He took one hand from the control board and pointed ahead. "Habitation, sir."

"Yes."

Monckton felt his muscles tense and his flesh prickle. The ship flashed over the cluster of houses, giving little time for Monckton to make out details. The houses seemed rather too regular for a low standard of civilisation; there was no indication of cooking fires and when, seconds later, the river flicked past beneath the ship Monckton noticed two small airboats moving towards the cluster of houses. He glanced ahead, his battle-trained eyes picking out a small hillock crowned with a sparse copse.

"Land in that wood, Cox," he ordered.

"Aye aye, sir," came the reply.

The escapeboat, guided by Cox's able hands, braked heavily but well under control, slewed round and dropped through the sheltering green of the trees. Suddenly there was silence, a silence so heavy and imponderable Monckton felt it hard to break with words. Cox was already busy with the atmosphere analyser while Balmain, empty shirt sleeve dangling uselessly from his shoulder, looked enviously at the master at arms' ten capable fingers working dials and punching studs. More than effort was needed to break the silence; from somewhere Monckton found the willpower to speak, asking himself if his reluctance to voice his instructions were due to being on a world so like his own. This would be an easy world to stay on . . .

"Balmain, fetch Slaney," he snapped.

The wireless operator took his glance away from Cox's hands, acknowledged the Commander's order and slipped from the control room. Cox looked up a few seconds after he had left.

"You'll pardon me, sir. He's dangerous. We'll have to watch him if we want to get out of this world alive."

Monckton felt his body tense; he hoped Cox hadn't noticed it. He had only considered distantly the possibility of murder but he realised, as soon as Cox alluded to it, that Balmain might go right off balance. "Those houses back there," continued Cox, "if the inhabitants are humanoid . . ."

A muffled knocking interrupted his words; for a moment a puzzled frown wrinkled his tanned forehead.

"What . . . ?" he began, looking round.

Monckton saw them first; two human faces, heavily tanned, peering through the transparent nose. Four fists stopped pounding when their owners were certain they had attracted attention, and the rumble of their knocking, transmitted by bracing members to the inner hull, ceased abruptly.

His body tingled; the inhabitants, humanoid and unafraid of spaceships, coming up to his ship, trying to attract the occupants' attention . . . Obviously these people had been in contact with some race equipped for space, but which? Earth civilisation, the Gornevian or another? Almost certainly the last, for heaven alone knew what continuum of space the escapeboat was in at present. Of course they could have their own space vessels, but Monckton had seen none in his approach to the planet.

"Trouble," breathed Cox; Monckton knew from his tone of voice that Cox's thoughts had worked on similar, if not identical, lines to his own.

"Atmosphere O.K.?" he asked.

"Equivalent to being seven thousand feet up a mountain, sir. We'll have to take life easily, with not too much running or other physical exertion. Otherwise excellent."

"They may be able to help us." Monckton knew his words sounded trite but felt he had to say something as he walked towards the nose. He knew what he should have done; instead of landing immediately he should have reconnoitred; should have studied the planet more carefully before ordering the ship down. It was too late now; he couldn't take off again without the possibility of killing the cheerfully grinning natives at the window with the backlash of the ship's propulsors, and he had no desire to do that. As he reached the window both men waved a hand of acknowledgment; one of them disappeared round the port side of the ship.

"Cox, get in the observation turret and see what he's up to," ordered Monckton.

As he spoke Cox was already up the fragile-looking ladder to the blister of perspex atop the vessel. The master at arms' report chilled him.

"He's standing by the airlock, sir, and there are two women with him. He's seen me and is making out he wants—the—airlock—opened."

Never before had Monckton heard Cox alter the rate of his speech.

"Come down and follow me with a blaster," he ordered. Obediently Cox slip-slopped down the companionway on rubber-soled shoes, the uppers of which, despite the fact that he was a castaway, were as highly polished as if he had been at Base or Training Depot.

Balmain and Slaney came up from the engine room aft as Monckton stepped from the little passageway to the airlock and pressed the switch to open it. He ignored the curious looks on their faces and waited impatiently while the airlock opened. A thin slit of light appeared between the metal leaves of the door, allowing a soft breeze of fresh, cool air to trickle in amongst the rank, sour, but still breathable atmosphere confined in the ship.

By the time the door was fully opened and the rolling, tree-dotted countryside laid open to their view, the fourth native had reached the airlock.

Monckton stepped out of the ship, delighting to feel grass beneath his feet after so many weeks of hard unyielding metal, and took in deep, appreciative breaths of the atmosphere.

"Come on out, everybody," he ordered.

One of the women, she was little more than a girl, clad in grey silky slacks and blouse which, Monckton observed, was merely a feminine variant of the men's clothing, stepped towards him, a smile on her oval face. Her brown hair was neatly coiffed about her head. She extended her right hand and said, "We are pleased to see you and hope we may be able to help . . ."

Monckton knew his mouth opened in surprise; never, in his whole life, not even beneath the incisive questioning of a judge, had he felt so baffled. His legal training stood him in good stead however, as he replied almost immediately.

"We thank you . . ." Suddenly courtesy re-asserted itself and he continued.

"Would you and your friends care to come aboard? I'm sure . . ."

"Thank you, no. We should be pleased, though, if you and your comrades would come to Tregonsis, our capital city . . ."

"You are very kind, but . . ."

"I think you wish to return to your own continuum in space, don't you? That may not be possible."

To himself Monckton admitted he was beaten. The woman to whom he was speaking seemed to know, not only all the answers,

but all the questions as well. Still, wanting to go home was a basic psychological reaction.

"My ship . . ." he protested briefly.

"It will be quite safe here; we have used matter-transmitters for a long time now, so nobody will want to take it."

That explained the lack of spaceships, anyway. Monckton stared hard into the speaker's eyes again; they were grey, calm and looked out from beneath a brow unmarked by a suspicion of a frown. There was a depth of wisdom and understanding in them, not often seen in Earth people's eyes.

"What will happen in—Tregonsis?" Monckton's tongue almost stumbled over the unfamiliar word.

"You wish to return to your own world, don't you? Our mathematicians will be able to assess your chances of making the trip. If it is possible and you decide to go we will supply you with all you need."

Monckton inhaled and exhaled deeply.

"How did you learn our language?" he asked.

The woman smiled.

"Just over a year ago a vessel very similar to yours crashed twelve miles from Tregonsis. There was very little we could do for the pilot as he was very nearly eaten away by radiation poisoning . . ."

"Atom dust . . ." muttered Monckton.

"Which you yourselves also use against the Gornevians, I believe?"

Monckton jumped; he felt only able to admit the fact.

"Yes."

"However, we investigated the ship thoroughly and I, as philologist of the group, learnt your language from the papers and tapes in the vessel." She paused. "We picked up your ship eight days ago, before you'd actually dropped into our planetary system, and followed you until landing. Now, would you ask your men to collect any personal belongings they wish to take with them and I'll fill in a lot more of the details you'll want to know about us when we get to Tregonsis."

Monckton turned back into the ship and ordered the others to collect their belongings and muster outside in ten minutes. He walked to his own cabin and sorted over the few possessions he had saved from the *Attila*. Some clothes, a dozen inch-cube tri-di transparencies of Spain, the watch his father had given him as a twenty-first birthday present and a small file of his professional successes and failures. There were other things he would have

liked to have taken but, anticipating only a short time away from the ship, he left them in a locker. He looked once more round the tiny cabin and stepped quickly into the corridor. Cox and Slaney were waiting outside the ship, standing apart from the tanned, grey-clothed natives.

"I'll go and see what's keeping Balmain, sir," said Cox. "His hand will have delayed him."

Monckton nodded and found his eyes wandering to the group of natives, talking quietly among themselves. They spoke in their own tongue and, strain his ears as hard as he might, Monckton could catch no word in their conversation he could recognise. Never once did any of them, apart from the man he was facing, so much as admit his presence. Suddenly Monckton was conscious of Cox by his side.

"Sir."

Monckton turned round; a glance at Cox's completely expressionless face told the story.

"It's Balmain, sir. He's committed suicide—the same way as Dyce did."

Without saying a word of acknowledgment Monckton strode back into the ship and along to Balmain's tiny cabin. The wireless operator's one-armed figure lay on the narrow bunk, features relaxed and peaceful, as still as only the features of the dead can be, and in his eyes the stare only dead ones can have.

Cox indicated a folded sheet of paper held like a cigarette between the fingers of Balmain's one hand. Gently Monckton tugged it free; the note was addressed to himself and said very little.

"I told you," Monckton read, half to himself, "I couldn't face life on Earth with only one arm. I know I couldn't here, either, not with people so obviously fit and active. Dyce showed me the way out and I wish he hadn't told me it didn't hurt . . . !"

There was no more.

Monckton looked from the scrap of paper to the still form and then into Cox's stone-coloured eyes.

"I don't understand it, sir," he said. "I've known men far more badly injured than Balmain yet they kept on living. There was one—he lost an arm, was three parts paralysed and was blinded, but he still managed to walk with sticks and get around a lot . . ."

"I think I understand," interrupted Monckton. "From the records I was sent of Balmain's I knew he'd been one of the unfortunate ones. Things had never gone quite right for him. He had a

miserable life when he was young, kicked around by circumstances . . .”

“That was his fault, surely, sir?”

“In a way. There was just no moral fibre in him to combat the kicking. Remember, Cox, the Navy brought you up; you were given every opportunity to develop moral fibre, but in Balmain its growth was stunted.”

Monckton pulled himself up sharply; he shouldn't have discussed the life of a man, even in such general terms, with an underling.

“Put him in the refrigerator; we'll bury him when we get into space again.”

Monckton walked out of the room into the corridor, glancing over his shoulder to see Cox, bending slightly to accommodate Balmain's lifeless form in the tiny corridor, making his way aft to the refrigerator. The cool breeze and the green landscape hit him like a blow, knocking some sense into his sickened soul. He told himself it was as well Balmain was dead the man was psychotic and would have been completely unreliable in an emergency.

The girl who had spoken to him, her grey clothing pressed against her body by the breeze, approached him, smiling.

“Will the others be along?” she asked.

“There will be only one other,” replied Monckton. “The man with only one arm committed suicide.”

“He—oh!”

Monckton felt surprised at the shock his statement had given her; felt a tight smile on his lips as, when she asked why, he handed her the piece of paper still clasped in his hand.

“Oh, poor man! We could so easily have grown him another arm,” she whispered.

Monckton swallowed heavily, feeling his mind baulk at the thought of a surgical, or rather biological, technique which could tamper with growth processes of cells and produce new limbs to order.

“How far away is Tregonsis?” he asked.

“About two hundred miles; we'll make the journey in a few minutes.”

An odd little silence fell; suddenly Monckton asked:

“Tell me something about this world. Whereabouts is it? What do you call yourselves? What's your own name?”

The woman laughed; a laugh which possessed a quality of rich humanity, one which above all, showed that despite her great

knowledge, she was a woman who responded to the desire to be known about for her own sake.

"I'm Seeana. What's your name?"

"Dennis Monckton."

He felt unusually reticent about introducing himself, despite having done it innumerable times in his life to widely differing people; he was used to being the centre of attraction, to having the eyes of all participants in a trial listening to every word he uttered, to the insults or cheers of approval from the public galleries and yet, to Seeana, a woman whom he had just met, one whom strangely enough he had not even bothered to assess, he felt as he had on the occasion a judge had floored him with the most ridiculous, but obvious, question.

"Your—friends are waiting." Seeana's voice, soft and warm, penetrated his quickly-working thoughts.

"We're ready," he replied and started walking beside her as she headed through the trees. Cox and Slaney fell in behind him and the other three grey-clad natives brought up the rear.

Monckton found time to study the landscape in detail, certain he could have been in one of the temperate zones of Earth during early summer. Without looking more closely at the trees he couldn't be certain they weren't the familiar oak and elm he knew so well from the English countryside; the grass beneath his feet was certainly as much like the grass of Earth he had known and the taste of a blade he picked and started to chew was identical with that back home. The sky overhead was as blue as Earth's on a summer's day, and the air, despite its thinness, could surely have belonged to no other world.

The party reached the river in just over ten minutes; a few hands waved to them from the habitations on the opposite bank while they picked their way along the water's edge to the two metal and plastic airboats floating on the sluggish river. Seeana, one of the natives and Monckton boarded the first of the boats, and Cox, Slaney and the other two natives climbed into the second. Under the impulse of the simplest of controls Monckton's airboat rose into the sky, rapidly picking up speed and leaving the spot where the escapeboat had landed far behind.

Monckton looked over the craft in a few minutes; there were hardly any controls and seemed to be no motor. For most of the journey, as Seeana sat forward with the pilot, he remained on the seat which ran round the cabin of the vessel and watched the landscape passing swiftly beneath. Darkness began to fall and occasional

lights denoting isolated habitations, and clusters indicating settlements of some size, flashed past beneath.

A glow on the horizon rapidly resolved into the multitude of individual lights of a city sprawling round an estuary and spreading like a crescent moon along the limbs of a huge bay. The plane slowed sufficiently for Monckton to pick out individual ships on the surface of the bay and the lights of vehicles speeding along the coast road. Suddenly he felt tired and at peace; without thinking he twisted his legs on to the seat, stretched himself out full length and slept.

Monckton knew he had gone to sleep without a care in the world; he awoke with the same feeling but mixed with the sensation of lightheartedness was an idea things had happened and were still happening about him. He felt cool sheets enveloping his body and, piece by piece, memory came back to him of the blow-up of the *Attila*, his escape, landing on this world, Seeana, Balmain's suicide. He opened his eyes, staring round into a small, comfortably furnished room. Over by a large window which opened on to a balcony was Cox, seated in a luxurious chair, reading and looking incongruous in a suit of Tregonsian grey. Monckton pulled himself into a sitting position.

"Cox, what's happened?" he demanded.

Cox laid down his book and walked over to him.

"How are you feeling, sir?" he asked.

"Very well, thank you, but . . ."

"I'm glad, sir. There's been trouble. As these people wanted to investigate us they doped all three of us while we were in the air-boats. Slaney recovered very quickly and when he came round he started his usual port-Casanova tricks on one of the nurses. Naturally she wasn't having any of his nonsense and Slaney almost went too far. He got away but I think these people will soon catch up with him. You and I were then subjected to a more thorough examination to make sure we weren't of the same breed. We aren't."

Monckton digested the facts mentally. Slaney, of course, would make for the escapeboat; he'd know he stood no chance on this world now. The soft purr of a buzzer interrupted his thoughts.

"Come in," called Cox.

Secana entered the room. She was wearing a similar suit of grey to the one in which she had first met Monckton and her hair, while still in the same style, was sprinkled with sparse specks of diamond



dust which threw off highlights like tiny silver sparks as she moved. She sat down on Monckton's bed.

"How are you feeling?" she asked.

"Very well indeed . . ."

"Has Cox told you . . ." she interrupted.

"He has. I'm very sorry that one of my men . . ."

"It wasn't your fault; you cannot accept any responsibility for that." She paused, a tiny frown appearing on her forehead. "We have learned something we think we should tell you. Do you feel sufficiently well to stand what might be a shock?"

"Yes. What is it?"

"While our surgeons were investigating you we took the liberty of exploring your ship thoroughly. We traced your course back through hyperspace to your own continuum and can replace you at the spot where your ship was destroyed. It will take you four years to get there."

"Four years!" exclaimed Monckton. "But it's not half that since we left Earth!"

"The original explosion of your ship threw you across an immense number of space continua and the resultant drift between this continuum and your own is very large."

"I see," murmured Monckton slowly. "When can we start the journey?"

"In a month. We shall install some additional safeguards in your vessel as it is so small."

A month! And then four years. Monckton couldn't take much interest in the remainder of the conversation; the length of time dazed him. Seena had little time to spare from her philological projects and left after another minute or two. As the door closed on her slim form Monckton shook his head and murmured:

"A month and then four years."

The month passed quickly; Monckton found himself welcomed by Seena's people and discovered, after three weeks of the four had passed that he had depended heavily upon Seena in her own spare time. He had nothing to do. Neither he nor Cox were allowed to visit their escapeboat as the tests of the safeguards being installed might be dangerous. Besides, as they had pointed out to them:

"Your presence just isn't necessary."

During the daytime, Monckton together with Cox explored the city in an autocar, taking runs into the surrounding countryside, swam in the bay, took out a boat and learned the history of Tregon-

sis from films and tapes, marvelling how closely it paralleled Earth's history. There had been the same long period of prehistory, a caveman era, a prophet whose teachings were eventually accepted by most of the world, a dark age followed by an age of discovery and the sudden use of machines. Atomic power had followed more slowly than on Earth, but after reaching the planets of their sun the Tregonsians had no hiatus before they stepped out to the stars. The invention and use of dimensional travel between stellar systems, based on principles he didn't understand, brought Monckton up to date. Slaney could have helped there . . .

Monckton felt worried because there had been no news of the absentee but consoled himself with the thought that if nothing had been reported of the man it was unlikely he had committed any other act which had crossed the rules of Tregonsis.

By evening Monckton sat in the room he shared with Cox until he knew Seeana had arrived home from her work. Then he took his autocar to her house and from there they would continue their exploration of Tregonsis. Tonight they were going right out of town, beyond the northern tip of the crescent-moon bay. Suddenly Monckton rose to his feet and commenced pacing up and down the room; he felt restless. A knock at the door halted his pacing.

"Come in," he called, glancing at his watch, suddenly hopeful that Seeana had been able to leave work early.

Cox entered; he always knocked on the door before coming in. The master at arms avoided Monckton's eyes for a moment, then fastened them with his gaze.

"I've made a very serious decision, sir," he stated.

Monckton had sensed that; he forced himself to be calm. What decision, what serious decision, could Cox make? Monckton knew there was only one, yet for a man whose life had been the Navy . . .

"I shall not be going back to Earth with you, sir."

"You're deserting?" snapped Monckton. He felt unsure of his ground; it would be best to play the game as the Navy's rules demanded.

"Yes, sir."

The direct admission puzzled Monckton.

"The penalty for desertion is death, Cox," he warned. "You have admitted your intention to me and, as there are extenuating circumstances—this is a very pleasant world—I will accept your statement that you will rejoin ship with me when we take off." Monckton knew he sounded pompous and insincere.

"I will not give it, sir."

Monckton sat on the bed; he allowed a smile to part his lips.

"Take a seat, Cox, and let's talk this over . . ."

"There's nothing to talk over, sir. I know you're aware of why I'm doing this but I'll try and put it into my own words. You set off the thought for me just after Balmain committed suicide. He'd persuaded himself he'd nothing to live for and, after that, I asked myself what I had to live for. I reviewed my life; I had accepted what the Navy offered and, as I was brought up in a Naval orphanage I possessed a tremendous edge in knowledge over other entrants to the Service. Also, although I didn't quite understand the feeling at the time, I was grateful to the Navy because it gave me that moral fibre, the lack of which in Balmain and others I didn't understand.

"I asked myself why the Navy always wanted recruits; at the back of my mind I suppose I knew why. Every man wants three things from this life, comfort and peace and that little plot of land on some planet he's visited in his career. The thing is most of them know that from the outset but the Navy's training blocked that desire in me. It took that from me and although it gave me a great deal in return I had no time to think, nor the chance to take another course of action.

"I didn't want to land on this planet; this is the sort of world which breeds desertion like a breeder pile produces neutrons. I knew we should loose Balmain and Slaney but I never thought I should be affected the same way. You see, sir, I've discovered this is the world I want to live on. You've only to walk around it to feel the peace, the calmness, the strength and maturity of these people . . ." Cox hesitated. "Besides, sir, I've found a girl here whom I . . ."

"I understand, Cox," interrupted Monckton. "I understand, but I don't condone . . ."

"You were a civilian once and knew civilian attitudes; don't they modify the Naval Regulations you're holding over me now?"

"Look at matters this way, Cox. The Gornevians and our civilisation are locked in a death struggle. Each of us wants the universe for his own. You are a highly trained and competent man; Earth needs you. Earth needs every man so that the Gornevians in their water-filled spaceships shan't be forever dropping in our seas and fouling them, killing the fish . . ."

Cox rose to his feet.

"I understand that, sir. Your plea might touch some idealistic rookie on the lower deck but it doesn't touch me. I know there's a solution to the problem. Admittedly the Gornevians foul our seas;

according to them we foul *their* seas with our sewage and factory waste. Both of us are right and both are wrong; a little thought, co-operation and discussion will end this war and both races will be able to live in peace. I've lived for the Navy long enough, sir. From now on I'm going to live for myself. The Navy gave me moral fibre, sir, but when it gave me that moral fibre it didn't know that in it I was also given the courage necessary to reject the Navy when the time came."

"Right, Cox. We've several days before we leave; I'll discuss this with you tomorrow."

"Yes, sir."

As soon as the door closed Monckton rose to his feet and started to pace the room. Cox's words had crystallised his own uncertain ideas; they had been growing, forming, dissolving, and re-forming in his mind. He was a civilian, not a Naval man. Why should he be penalised by spending his life in a tin-can of a warship away from the things for which he had designed his life? Cox had supplied the answer; pigheadedness on the part of both Gornevians and Earthmen. Millions of both races had been killed in a struggle which, like most wars, needn't really have begun. The universe was large enough, surely, to contain two races, yet two utterly different life-forms, both with high standards of scientific, if not moral, civilisation warred over something which could be settled with a few words of conciliation from the directors of the war. Monckton stopped his pacing and glanced at his watch; he was late leaving to pick up Seena.

She was waiting in the porch of her pleasant white-brick house as he drew up his autocar. She walked along the path between the two neat lawns to his autocar, a slim figure in silky grey slacks and blouse. Her lips were parted in a smile of welcome which faded suddenly as her eyes met his.

"You're worried, Dennis. What's the matter? Don't you want to leave us?"

Monckton started; even having been with Seena a month he was still surprised at having his Christian name used regularly. He smiled mechanically, trying to find the courage to admit, even to himself, that the answer to the question she had asked him was, "Yes."

"It's a worrying time," he admitted as she climbed into the autocar and pulled the door shut behind her. "North Tip tonight?" he asked, setting the car in motion.

"Yes," she replied, smiling at him through the rear-view mirror set between them.

"Set for swimming?"

She nodded, but this time there was no answering smile reflected by the mirror.

They didn't talk while the car sped towards North Tip through the evening, twilight developing as the sun sank slowly below the horizon and night, pin-pointed with a myriad now-familiar stars, dropped like a velvet cape over the world. Ahead of them stretched the road, curving gently to the left, a ribbon of light across the darkness.

North Tip, with its huge car-park, lighted cafés and sports arena flashed past and the road narrowed, became less well lighted and almost deserted. They sped on for a few more miles until Secana said, "Let's stop, Dennis. We can swim from a little bay just down here."

Obediently Monckton halted their vehicle and helped Secana from the car, walking alongside her over the grass. A cool breeze blew from the sea, hardly noticeable and insufficient to dispel the scent of the flowering trees and bushes which lay heavily on the night air. Suddenly Secana laughed and darted away from Monckton; he started to run, too, following the narrow path to the sea. He felt soft sand beneath his feet and halted, realising he had lost sight of Secana behind some dunes. He glanced round, his face broadening in a grin as he heard her call. She had slipped off her blouse and slacks and stood on the beach waving to him, clad in silvery bathing costume which threw off highlights as she moved.

Monckton slipped off his own shirt and slacks, beneath which he was wearing bathing trunks, kicked off his sandals and trotted towards Secana. She started to run to the sea, Monckton rapidly overhauling her. Suddenly she slipped, her silver bathing dress a cascade of stars, as she tumbled to the soft sand. Monckton spurted towards her and dropped to his knees beside her.

"Secana . . ." he began.

"I'm all right," she laughed. "It was so silly . . ."

Monckton found he was laughing, too. He placed his arm beneath her shoulders and helped her into a sitting position. He felt her arm, soft, about his bare waist and suddenly his resolutions, his assumed coldness towards her were gone; he pressed his lips to hers and revelled in the warm response she made. For a while time seemed to stand still as Monckton crushed her slender body to his, caressing her and hungrily devouring the kisses she gave him.

"Dennis," she whispered.

"What is it?" He looked into her eyes; saw, in the starlight, that they were wet with tears. "You're crying . . ."

"I know. I've got something so difficult to tell you and—and we—we shouldn't have kissed like that just now. I know you've been keeping me at arm's length because you've got to go back to Earth and may not live to return here when the war with Gornevians is finished. Dennis, I love you for that sentiment. You didn't want to hurt me. You . . . oh, Dennis!"

She curled up against him, pressing her face against his chest. He stroked her hair gently, conscious that her tears, warm little secretions of her emotions, were trickling like tiny rivulets down his body. Monckton felt his mouth tighten; she'd seen through his attempted deception ever since he had started it; its effect had been exactly opposite from what he'd intended and had completely ruined his plans.

He attempted to analyse his own emotions; he couldn't remain on Tregonsis while Earth was still at war with the Gornevians as his conscience wouldn't permit him to do that. Furthermore if he did stay here there was the danger that Seeana might regard him as a coward. Then, too, there was Cox; Monckton couldn't accede to the master at arms' request by following his example and just not leaving the planet.

"Dennis . . ."

"Seeana . . ."

"There's something else I have to tell you," she whispered. "Your world, your Earth, is in great danger. Your enemies have blasted through your peoples' defences on the Alpha Centauri planets, destroying the worlds utterly and have gained footholds on three planets of your sun . . ."

"I must go, Seeana." Monckton's thoughts were moving like lightning. Slaney came from one of the Centauri worlds.

"You don't have to go, Dennis. I shan't think any the worse of you for that. Besides, it will take well over four years for you to reach Earth and the position will have changed tremendously by then. The war will probably be over . . ."

For a moment Monckton was tempted.

"No, Seeana, I must go. If the war has finished I'll come straight back to Tregonsis . . ."

"Dennis, eight years—no, don't go! From the beginning your whole attitude has told me that what you need most of all is somewhere to come home to, a haven, a place where you're welcomed

and wanted. You won't have that while Earth is at war with Gornevians and you may not when the fighting's finished . . ."

She raised her head, the distant stars reflected specks of silver in her tear-filled eyes. Monckton felt her hands tighten on his biceps in an almost unendurable grasp.

"I have my duty to Earth, Seeana," he replied softly, "but I'll come back as soon as I can."

She nodded and murmured.

"I understand."

He helped her to her feet; they dressed and walked silently to the autocar. Monckton drove back to his own apartment, leaving Seeana in the vehicle while he went to see if Cox was in their room. He wasn't, and when Monckton returned to the road Seeana had left the car; it stood, empty, emitting a little humming noise. Monckton climbed aboard and drove towards Seeana's home, suddenly stopping the vehicle. It was no use going to the obvious place; Seeana had vanished to save the wrench of parting and wouldn't be anywhere near where she worked or where she lived.

Monckton knew what he was going to do. Cox could stay on Tregonsis; Slaney had deserted and that was his affair. Monckton was going back to Earth, to help—if he could. He drove the autocar with complete disregard for its mechanism along the main road which led out of Tregonsis and through the fertile countryside to where his escapeboat had landed, the escapeboat which would take him away, perhaps forever, from Seeana.

Dawn broke over the world and found Monckton, weary and red-eyed from the strain of driving by the stars all night, something over half-way towards his destination. Once he drove his vehicle into a convenient clump of trees alongside the road while an airboat flitted low overhead. The occupants might be looking for him, or they might not, but he was taking no chances.

Immediately the airboat was out of sight Monckton, despite increasing weariness and soul-sickness, forced himself on. He knew that if he allowed himself to stop for rest or sleep he would reconsider his decision and permit himself to return to Seeana. She offered what no other woman had ever seemed able to offer him; peace, security and a tremendous sense of well-being, a person whom, it seemed, time would not change. Monckton knew the lines his thoughts were following; he attempted to press the accelerator further than its limit, grinding the pedal against the floor.

Suddenly he stopped; the territory seemed familiar. He sniffed the air, deciding it contained a distinct tang of water. The river near his escapeboat—and the road he was on led to the small cluster of houses on the opposite side of the stream from his ship. He'd have to swim the river but it would be no great obstacle. He drove the car deliberately off the road, bumping over uneven ground towards the river. He reached it eventually and halted the vehicle, jumping out and stripping off his clothes. Wearily he waded into the sluggish river and struck out for the opposite bank. His tired body ploughed slowly through the water, dragged downstream by the slight current. Exhausted, he reached the other side and scrambled clear of the water, flopping face downwards on the grass.

For a while he lay there, thoughts in a whirl, finally forcing himself to his feet and tottering up the incline, wearily placing one leg beyond the other, acutely aware of how easy and pleasant it would be to call it quits and return to Seeana. He pushed the thought out of his mind and staggered on, conscious that darkness was falling again and that he had eaten nothing for over a day. Nine-tenths of his mind told him to stop, to lay in the grass until he recovered his strength and then return to Seeana, while the remaining obstinate tenth drove him onward, the tenth which refused to allow him to admit to himself wholeheartedly, as Cox had done, that a man lived for himself and not for anything which demanded his life, and probably his death as well.

Earth needed him; he wasn't a good Commander but he was good enough to be a Commander. He was no Blane of Arcturus, or Kingsmith who had defended Centaurus in the first Gornevian attacks; he was Monckton, dragged from defending the rights of an individual to defending his world. He loved Earth; a man always loved the world which bore him . . . Right now, Earth needed him; She needed Cox; she needed every man there was . . . Cox and Slaney had deserted her, so had Balmain, but at least he hadn't swung to the passive neutrality of living elsewhere; he'd taken the last irrevocable step.

Monckton called a halt to his racing thoughts and stood still panting on the hillside. Ahead of him gleamed the silver shape of the escapeboat, the vessel which would take him away from Seeana to a maelstrom of death and destruction. Suddenly he tensed, a tingle of excitement electrifying new life in his tired body. Slaney stepped out of the airlock; limp, at best unconscious, in his arms he carried Seeana.

"What do you want?" demanded Slaney. He lowered Seeana to



the ground and stepped, delicately balanced on the balls of his feet, towards Monckton.

"We're going back to Earth," whispered Monckton.

"I am," replied Slaney, hands bunching into fists at his sides. His muscular arms tensed.

"What have you done to Seeana?" demanded Monckton.

"Nothing. She seemed to be more interested in you, so she might as well stay here with you. I don't want anybody on board who's going to stab me in the back during the voyage."

Monckton retreated a pace, suddenly aware Slaney was upon him, fists descending on his tired and aching body with a force which deadened but didn't seem to hurt. Somehow Monckton knew he'd been knocked to the ground and was hardly aware of having struck a blow in his defence. The sight of Slaney's face, blood trickling from a cut lip and streaming from a damaged eye told him he hadn't acquitted himself too badly. Slaney's boot thumped into his ribs.

"Think I'm going back with you? Not likely; if you come back with me I shall go to Earth and I'll be psyched on account of that nurse if nothing else and I don't intend to be psyched. Got it? I'm going to Alpha Centauri, see? The Tregonsians have put the maths in the calculator for me and I'll be back at the explosion point in four years."

Slaney's boot thumped into Monckton's ribs a second time and, as pain knocked Monckton's tired body to near unconsciousness, a part of his brain remembered something Seeana had told him which Slaney wouldn't know. Alpha Centauri had been shattered by the Gornevian attacks. Monckton tried to laugh, but it hurt his ribs. Slaney, the only man he'd thought would really desert was going to be the only one to leave Tregonsis and he, through his own actions, was leaving it to carry on a career on a world which he didn't know was any longer in existence.

The thought of Seeana needled energy into Monckton's body. When Slaney switched on the spacedrive the pair of them would get an awful buffeting. He crawled towards her slim, grey-clad figure, laying curled up on the grass. There was a frightful pain in his ribs where Slaney had kicked him, but he crawled on, touched her with his outstretched hand. She moved slightly and tried to sit up. She saw him.

"Dennis! I wondered where you were." She broke off, placing her hands to her temples. "Oh, my head . . . Dennis, I was going

to come to Earth with you; that was something neither of us had thought of . . .”

The space drive started up and for an age, before unconsciousness overtook him, Monckton was aware of an excruciating, paralysing pain throughout his body, pain which he thought he was no longer capable of feeling. As darkness descended he could feel Seeana's body, trembling with agony, alongside his own.

Monckton awoke, in full possession of his senses. He was back in his room in Tregonsis; Cox, in the inevitable grey slacks and shirt, sat over by the window, reading.

“Cox.”

The master at arms laid down his book and walked over to him.

“You're all right now, sir. I'll tell you, though, you talked an awful lot in delirium about your duty to Earth and your inclination to stay here; I'd like to congratulate you on not showing the fix you were in between the time we landed and the time Slaney blasted off. Seeana's progressing very well, too.”

Monckton felt a smile appear on his features; Cox, the man who never missed a trick, had failed to detect his emotions, yet Seeana had spotted them immediately.

“There's something else important. That attack on Earth was the Gornevians' last effort. Kingsmith and Blane turned it and negotiations are now going on about territorial rights, so neither of us need worry about duty any longer, need we—Dennis?”

Cox extended his right hand. Tiredly Monckton stretched his own from beneath the sheets, trying hard to remember from his knowledge of ship's records, Cox's Christian name. Dammit, it was the same as his own!

“Thanks—Dennis,” he grinned as the master at arms' hand clasped his own.

—Peter Hawkins

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